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**Plain**  
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S I M P L E S



# SIMPLES

*by*

IAN IRONS /



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THOMAS SELTZER

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## *Chapter 1*

i

**S**O Aunt Heppie was dead.

Alban Kent, just back from the Bottom where the air blew in scarves, now warm-scented with the soft honey-smell of privets, now salt-sharp from its leap straight out of the Atlantic, found Rosamund's letter telling him that Aunt Heppie had accomplished the impossible and died.

His mind was still occupied with the work he had just left, the big strip of Belladonna he had added to the bigger strip of Yarrow. His thoughts were also playing over the sun-patch of simples he had passed on the way to the house, old Moap's favourite child, which he had not the heart to disturb—the Sweet Flag, Cuckoo Pint, Rue, Sundew, Sanicle, Chervil, Coriander, American Skull Cap, Savory . . .

What names they had, sounding like old ballads! The hand that gripped the open letter held a sprig of Rue, the old Rue handed to judges when they went into court to ward off jail fever.

With these things in his mind it was hard to grasp so unique a matter as Aunt Heppie's death. . . .

" . . . She died undeviatingly Aunt Heppie," Rosamund wrote, "browbeating the doctor, protesting to mother that Earlhampton was no place for

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a woman of her degree to end her days in, even keeping death firmly in its place . . . ”

Rosamund at a touch had recreated Aunt Heppie. Alban began to realise the old woman again and her devastating meaning.

### ii

Below him, beyond the drowsy-soft sweep of the land, the sea in a moving floor of blue and gold peridot went breathing gently to a horizon faintly pearl-dusted.

The sun, here as clear as thin, golden cider, blurred the cliffs of the Cap in a soft, mealy gold-pink.

The tremendous peace of God rested on the land. Quiet—it was beyond quiet, a quietude immense, soft, and soothing. Under the sun the reposeful and gentle world spread out with the beauty of music in its mist of blending colours; blue, green-gold, dull green, green as sharp as a shout, brown, biscuit, red, olive-green, purple, purple and lilac in some shadows, purple with a hint of gold in others.

Wonderful quiet colours blending with the shy and indescribable scents that rose and mingled with the beauty of colour and quiet and sun.

Hard to find Aunt Heppie significant in a place and moment like this.

But she was. She had even led to this. But for her ugly harshness this might not have been.

Queer how even Aunt Heppie's spitefulness had

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led to the happiness of one she looked upon with wrath.

### iii

Everything led back to that venomous word of Aunt Heppie's. Alban with his mind dwelling upon his "physicke garden" and all that was bound up in it saw that.

He recalled the moment when everything had begun to move in this direction.

Aunt Heppie the natural precipitator of crises; Aunt Heppie that inevitable pillar of the cloud of foreboding; that loom of Fate bulking expectedly but always suddenly in the faintly curry-coloured gloom of Watchkeep Street; Aunt Heppie that Valkyrie with a bustle presaging disaster had come on her semi-annual visit to the Kents.

An important visit fraught with terror this time; for she had come to meet and look over—and disapprove—Gilda Conroy who had for some months been engaged to Edwin Kent.

It was an understood thing that nobody ever met Aunt Heppie at the Central Station. She regarded it as an affront. It suggested that she, in her incalculable age—how old was she? somewhere between seventy and the record of Methuselah, Edwin declared—was incapable of taking care of herself. And another proof of her eternal hardness was that she walked, ignoring all conveyances. She walked,

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so that the chill of her coming had a lingering dread from the moment she turned into the old street and the Kent on watch in the pot-bellied window signalled her dawn.

Perhaps the whole street realised her. The Kents felt it must. As she marched down it she dwarfed it with her terrific superiority, her every footfall was a trumpet of contempt.

Ferociously rigid, her unimaginably lean upper slopes thin and parched and barren—as though the harsh and austere suns of her immense social position had scorched her to the purple aridity of a lone Himalayan peak—were rooted strongly in vast areas of redundant hips that took the mind back through decades of fashion to the dim age of the Eugenie crinoline—hips startling and brimming over, that made of her foundations one vast bell of curves and masses.

Amazing that so much hips should support so little—astonishing that Nature should have joined the halves of two physically incompatible women into this amazing whole.

Nature had not. The hips were magnificent, but they were not Nature. They were not even Aunt Heppie. They were Aunt Heppie's suit-case. That inexplicable voluptuousness was Aunt Heppie's bed-guy, and her alpaca apron, her house skirt, her single change, her toilet bag, and the rest.

Aunt Heppie never carried a valise. She carried a bit of cord. It was round her waist between her

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petticoats, and all that she required for any visit was slung to it.

She took no pride in that act of genius, for she was thoroughly accustomed to herself as a living example of economy and practicality. And she wasn't eccentric. Only common people, those who lived in Earlhampton and not in her Cathedral city, for example, were that.

Camillus Kent called from the window, "There she looms, the shy flower of the Cathedral Close, the bitter Virgin of Saint Rood."

That wasn't Camillus's own wit. It was one of Edwin's queer, spontaneous sparkles. Camillus was the echo of Edwin.

Mrs. Kent immediately fluttering: "Camillus, you mustn't. Be careful now. Remember how difficult your Aunt is. Let this visit at least be without a scene."

If Edwin had been there he would have said: "What, and deprive her of the sweet wrath that makes life happy for her?" But Camillus could not rise to that. He only shrank back into a corner where he hoped he would escape his aunt's eye.

Mrs. Kent peeped out of the window and drew back in fright: "She's here. Quick! One of you open the door. Quick . . . before the servants. . . . ."

Mrs. Kent was terrified lest the servants failed to realise that the strangeness of Aunt Heppie's manner was the fine flavour of aristocracy. They would, unless someone forestalled the parlour-maid and

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opened the door. Aunt Heppie scorned bells and knockers. She signalled her arrival by drawing her stout umbrella vigorously along the iron railings in front of the house. The clamour seemed to ring right through Earlhampton, and it certainly disturbed the servants.

“Quick,” cried Mrs. Kent again, “she’s practically here. Do open the door one of you—quickly.”

But none of the Kent children was anxious to open the door. Aunt Heppie in her initial impact was usually scorifying. They hated her with the earnestness begot of fear. That is, all save Alban. It was not the least part of Alban’s queerness that he could stand up to Aunt Heppie.

Alban went to the door.

### iv

Aunt Heppie was indubitably Aunt Heppie from the door-mat. Her tart, thin voice pierced through the house at once.

“You, Alban? Don’t you keep a maid?”

“We want to,” said Alban in his easy, dry voice. Camillus giggled, seeing the point. Mrs. Kent, frightened, said “Shiss!”

“Back from your weed patch, I see,” said the bitter voice.

“That one didn’t hurt,” came Alban’s voice. ‘Weed’ happens to be the official term for medicinal

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herbs, so I can't feel small. Yes, I'm back from the Farm to-day."

Mrs. Kent was intensely sorry she had let Alban open the door. She moved forward to repair her mistake. But Aunt Heppie was not so easily put out. She said:

"Wasting and fribbling away your time like that. Scandalous! Ain't you of any real use?"

"Oh, yes, I can open the door to you, Aunt." Alban's voice was slow and genial. Mrs. Kent was really in terror at it.

"Stuff and rubbish," from Aunt Heppie. "Anybody's job."

"Not in this house," the dry voice said. "I alone can sustain the shock."

"That's impertinence," said Aunt Heppie, showing no trace of color. She expected that from Earlhampton, and then she knew Alban—the changeling, she called him. "But you know no better, I suppose."

"Much better, Aunt, but one naturally accommodates one's knowledge to the circumstances."

Mrs. Kent was in the hall by this, angry with herself for allowing Alban to answer the door. She ought to have remembered that Alban was always a source of trouble. She tried to straighten things out, minutes too late, as usual. She held out her hands crying with an artificial warmth in the hope of thawing the chilly situation.

"Aunt! Aunt Heppie! You've arrived!"

"Anything wrong with your eyes?" snapped Aunt Heppie.

Mrs. Kent knew that the coming of Aunt Heppie into the world had been the dawn of trouble for the Kent family. Her husband had made that plain. Her husband had said, "Some of us are queer, Agnes. I'm rather queer myself." That was true, he had the strangest, wildest ideas, just as Alban had now. "But the queerest of us all is Heppie. You'll find her very difficult at times."

That was true enough. Only Mrs. Kent wondered why her husband had limited Heppie's difficulties to "times." Never was she otherwise.

She knew that now as she looked at the fierce, parched visage of her dead husband's sister. She tried to explain that "You've arrived" was a figure of speech, a tribal call even.

"Stoopid and meaningless," said Aunt Heppie. "Don't you take that wrap. I'll keep my hand on *that* till I've got it under lock and key. You've given me a what-not with a key *this* time, I hope, Agnes."

She was by this time actually in the drawing-room, chilling the assembled family with the cold, sweeping aristocratic glance of the Cathedral city of Rood.

"Knew you'd have one o' these hand-painted mirrors in your grate," she said ferociously. "I'll lay there's not a house in the whole of Earlhampton that hasn't one." She sniffed with the fervour of a steam exhaust. "To live in Earlhampton is bad

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enough. To *be* Earlhampton is the devil . . .  
Where's the girl?"

vi

Gilda Conroy was the girl.

Gilda, with her usual quiet serenity, suffered the acid stare of the faded icicles that were Aunt's eyes. Edwin in his quick, lively way must have made Aunt Heppie's character familiar to Gilda, and she was not intimidated. The old woman glared at the Madonna face with the interest of an adder about to strike. One could see that she was determined to bend this prospective new member of her derogatory family to her will. One could see, too, that Gilda's refusal to be embarrassed piqued her.

"Hmmm!" sniffed Aunt Heppie, galled at her unsuccess. "Who told me she was a beauty?"

"Your eyes perhaps," said Alban, quietly.

Mrs. Kent signalled wildly with her eyebrows to her abnormal son.

"When I was a girl we had very high standards," began Aunt Heppie.

"Times have changed," said Alban, in his amiable but unyielding tone. "When William the Conqueror reigned . . ."

"Alban, don't be rude," cried Mrs. Kent, decisive at last.

"But we're being rude," said Alban, unabashed. "Aren't we, Aunt Heppie?"

Aunt Heppie the tremendous showed no sign. She never did—that was the Kent in her. She recog-

II

nised the Kent in Alban, too. He had the same queerness that made her, and had made his father, difficult. Perhaps she feared him. He was the single one of all Agnes Hollaway's kishload (she never publicly admitted her brother had any hand in them) who met her on her own ground and with her own weapons. Not Oswald the eldest and woolliest, not Edwin the nimble-tongued and engaging rake, nor Dunstan, nor Camillus, nor Ethelfleda, nor any of that spineless band of children that had been born apparently, as Edwin had put it, in a moment of passion begot of reading the Anglo-Saxon instalment of somebody's Outline of History, had ever stood up to her and matched her redoubtable rudeness with rudeness as redoubtable. This long and gangling Alban was alone of obdurate metal. She sneered away from him.

"So," she sneered to Gilda, "you're Edwin's intended. Where's Edwin? Not here, naturally."

The family was at once looking down its nose and shutting its lips tight as usual at the mention of that gay, wayward, jolly, but utterly unreliable spark, Edwin. It was Mrs. Kent who said with an effort at airiness, "He's out at present."

"And on no good business, I'll lay," said the old termagant.

"On the firm's, I imagine," said Mrs. Kent, coldly.

And then Ethelfleda crashed in in wild, brainless defence of her beloved brother: "He simply *had* to go to Brackenhurst. He told me so."

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Dead silence then. Ethelfleda had lived right up to her splendid capacity for putting her foot in it. Alban was frowning blackly, staring at Mrs. Kent, and Mrs. Kent was avoiding Alban's gaze, in fear.

Aunt Heppie had at once made a horrible moment worse with her ghastly bluntness.

"You don't tell me he's still seeing the widow creature?" she said, and she grinned wolfishly at Gilda. "What do you find in a raffish young man like that?"

Alban said without his usual touch of amiability: "There are times, Aunt Heppie, when even your vulgarity goes beyond the limits of endurance."

"Ho!" she snarled, and she glared at him like an aged snake. "Who asked your opinion?"

"You are going to have it, asked or not. You are a detestable old tyrant, and your questions are unwarrantably impertinent."

"Ho!" Aunt Heppie snorted again. "You the girl's defender? You her sweetheart? You her intended?"

She said it with venom and her face showed immediate satisfaction. Alban's lean, thrusting features, the blue, dreamy, speculative eyes that had become steel-points of anger suddenly winced. Hot colour poured into the cheeks and climbed the high, narrow forehead. And Alban knew what it meant, and the family, and perhaps Gilda, too.

That was the moment when it became apparent that Alban loved Gilda.

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For a fleeting second his physical betrayal lasted.  
Then:

"That's a damned . . ."

"Shut up, Alban," said Oswald, who had just come in. "Do you hear? Shut up! Better get out of the room."

Alban swept round on his heel and carried his figure at a little run out of the room.

Aunt Heppie had triumphed. She had justified her office as a stirrer-up of trouble. She had exposed Alban's unsuspected love for his brother's fiancée. She was filled with the dry joy of satisfaction. No more need to cause disturbance. Beyond pointing out that a silver Queen Anne teapot was a replica of one she had at Rood, and therefore not at all compatible with Mrs. Kent's station in life, her visit passed off in satisfied calm.

Her words had started the thing, and from thence on the crisis developed.

## *Chapter II*

### i

PERHAPS it would be truer to say that although Aunt Heppie's words precipitated the tragedy, all the ingredients were already there, had, in fact, been accumulating ever since Alban was born.

Alban had always been different, the queer one of the family. He had ideas outside the ordinary, that is the family, understanding.

"He is just like his father at times," Mrs. Kent would say to Oswald, her eldest, her dearest, the boy who had the fine, solid, woolly, enduring ordinariness of herself, of her own beloved father and mother. "There are moments when Alban is your father all over again. I loved him very dearly, Oswald, but I can't help saying there were occasions when he tried me hard. He had the most incomprehensible ideas—senseless. One couldn't argue with him. Sometimes he seemed to me to be not quite balanced on some points, he was so wilful. And Alban is like that. But I could manage your father."

Alban and his ideas were always a great trial. Even as a child, as a school-boy, his habit of going contrary to the sun was a source of trouble. He was forever thrusting his conceptions of what was right athwart what his fellows thought enjoyable.

## An instance:

There was a time at school when a bright intellect had organised a rag on Preacher's Cottage. The bright intellect was probably Edwin's. Even in those days his liveliness, superficial winningness, his quickness and jolliness drew boys to him, made him a sort of leader, and even then his waywardness had a touch of malice in it.

Preacher was a Dissenter in the village near the school, and for that and no other reason unpopular. He was at that period building a cottage against the school hedge, and had the walls up as far as the first floor. The idea of "sliming" through the hedge and levelling those walls to the earth was considered so brilliant that only the presence and popularity of his two big brothers, Oswald and Edwin, saved Alban from attack when he said that the project was rotten and caddish.

"Clout his silly young head," cried half a dozen voices, and Edwin jeered at him in good humour, "Go and hide yourself somewhere, you idiotic early Christian, you aren't popular with the lions."

Alban simply said: "I won't, and if this is your idea, Edwin, it's the idea of a skunk. It's mean . . ."

"Suppress that child," said someone, and Oswald for the good repute of the Kents caught Alban's arm, and with a twist shot the figure, which seemed to be strung together by jangling wires, out of the crowd of boys.

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"Get out of this before you get a good toeing," said Oswald, as solemn then as always, "and keep out of sight until you've got over making an ass of yourself."

Alban picked himself up and came straight back to the group.

"I don't care what you do. It's a caddish idea, and if you do it, I'll go straight to the Head and split."

"The dirty little sneak," shouted several.

"It's not sneaking, because I'm telling you now straight."

Edwin, always a fellow of quickness, jumped at Alban and clouted him hard over the left ear. Alban thereupon butted his brother with his head, so hard that Edwin rolled on the ground and had to be attended to by several warm pals.

In the confusion Oswald, feeling that the honour of the family was at stake, again secured Alban's spindly arm, and proceeded to hit him well and truly on the strained biceps.

"Will you shut up now?" he demanded when he felt he had hit enough.

"I won't. You won't make me, either. It *is* caddish and mean. Preacher's done no harm to us. He's spent money building that cottage and he'll lose if we knock it down. I will split. I swear, I'll split. It's the only decent thing to do."

"The little worm," said a big boy. "He will, too. What a slug, to spoil the best lark of the term."

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"That's not a lark, it's hooliganism," said Alban.

"You don't know what a lark is, you young scug."

"Don't I," he challenged. "If you want a lark, who'll come with me to the Head's study and paint the nose of Marcus Aurelius red?"

### iii

Queer kid, Alban. He threatened to and would have split if they attempted one lark, but carried out the other with tremendous aplomb. The bust of Marcus Aurelius had the most gorgeous red nose for weeks, and Alban got a month's detention and six on each from the leather paddycock for his triumph.

He need not have had that punishment, either. The school was backing him in spite of the thunder of the authorities. The school assured him, and he knew it as a fact, that no one would split. But he owned up himself. There was no reason why one hundred and fifty boys should be punished for the deed of one, he said.

A strange nature with fixed, high-falutin' ideas, his fellows thought, and quite willing to be a martyr to those ideas. It was hard to understand a queer fish of his sort.

Edwin and his particular friends could not.

Edwin even in his teens was a debonair and wayward creature. He had an engaging and spontaneous manner and a light boldness that gave him charm and made him many friends. That his dar-

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ing led him gaily to break rules even then did not make him less heroic in the eyes of those who cared for him.

But Edwin certainly was not the fellow to suffer that the school might go free.

He and certain of his friends were seen smoking by a short-sighted master, and they remained obdurately mum while the authorities threatened to blot out a full play-day unless the unspecified culprits owned up.

Thanks to the unwritten laws of school nobody would sneak, though many knew and most suspected. Edwin made the most of the unwritten law and went about with a guileless air, refusing to "own up," though others threw black glances at him.

It was Alban who said point-blank, "If you don't own up, you scug, I'll do it for you."

"Good," said Edwin. "You always had the means to go into the business of the sacrificial goat. You'll get seven on each."

"I mean," said Alban, deliberately, "I shall tell the Head you were one of the smokers."

"I think you're asking for a punch in the mouth, young Alban," said Edwin, dropping his humourous outlook.

"I mean it. Are you going to own up?"

"And I mean it, too, you howling young sneak. Blab a word and I twist your neck."

"The real sneak work is *not* owning up," said Alban. "It's not fair and it's not straight."

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"Fair and straight be hanged. Mind your own business or I'll punch your ruddy young head off."

"That's what I'm doing. It *is* my business. You're my brother, it's us, the Kents, who're behaving shabbily to the school."

Edwin argued no longer. He punched Alban's head, punched it well and often. Alban fought him like a cat. Knocked down, he was up at once, without resting, and fighting again. Alban never paid the slightest attention to heavier weight. He would have gone on until he was killed had not Oswald arrived to tear his brothers apart.

"Now what about sneaking?" snarled Edwin through bloody lips. "You understand now what it'll mean to you."

"I'm telling the Head after night prayers if you don't do it before," cried Alban in spite of his battered face.

"But I've licked you, you young fool."

"What difference does that make?"

It made no difference. Not even when Oswald threw in his weight did it make a difference. Oswald with heavy stolidity tried to make the young ass see the accepted point of view.

"Can't you see you can't tell? It's your own brother, man."

"It's you who can't see," insisted Alban. "It's just because he is our brother I've got to do it. If it wasn't my brother I couldn't."

"You leave me gasping," groaned Oswald. "You

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really do. Nobody else in the school thinks of sneaking."

"That's it. They won't. They know who did the smoking but they won't blab. That's the decency of them. Edwin should be decent in turn, and, since he won't, why it's up to us, who're sort of responsible for him, to prevent him doing this caddish thing against the school."

"I'll punch your nose," interrupted Edwin.

"Shut up, Ed. Let the little rat spit it out," said Oswald.

"Don't you see," Alban pressed, "we've got to sort of save the Kent name. Don't you see?"

"I'm blowed if I do. Don't *you* see you ought to stick by your brother?"

"Not when he's wrong, and against everybody else in the right."

"That's tripe if you like. A brother's a brother . . ."

"It's being right that counts. Nobody counts if you have to go straight, behave decently."

"Never heard such muck," cried Oswald, gazing down upon his shambling colt of a junior with eyes really amazed. "Where do you get your ideas? Look here, *I'm* not splitting, and, by Jove, *I'm* his elder brother. *I'm* the one to do it if anyone."

"Of course you are," said Alban, amazed that Oswald had only just seen it.

"You damn little fool," shouted Oswald, taken aback. "If you don't dry up now and keep your mouth shut, I'll kick you round the footer field."

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"Just as you like. But after prayers I go to the Head if Edwin doesn't."

Edwin knew it was hopeless. He snarled: "If you're so almighty pi, why not be a real saint and say you did it yourself? The honour of the family and the what-d'y call 'em of decency will be satisfied then."

Alban stared at him amazed: "I can't understand you chaps a bit. That'd be sheer lying."

"The chump's the limit," jeered Edwin.

"He's loony," agreed Oswald. "It's no good arguing, but look here, Alban, I'll flay the skin off your behind if you split. Understand?"

"It'll depend on Edwin, then," said Alban, without excitement.

It didn't really. Edwin had no intention of owning up if he could help it, and he held out until he saw Alban break from the line of boys going to the dormitories that night, and make for the Headmaster's door. He ran after Alban, hit him squarely on the ear, snarled savagely, "Get back to line. Of course I'm owning up."

He went down the passage, hesitated at the dread door, saw that Alban was waiting and calmly watching, went in and owned up.

It is a sidelight on Edwin's charm that he became even more popular for owning up and saving the school, and that when he gave Alban another hiding for forcing him to perform this heroic deed, the school agreed that Alban deserved it for not playing quite squarely with such a jolly nice chap as Edwin.

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### iv

A difficult customer, Alban, with his “straight thing to do” and his passion for decency.

It was just as troublesome to the family when he left school. The family insisted that there was no knowing how Alban would take anything, or rather one always did know. He was always on the other side.

“What’s that you said?” Edwin would mock in a mimicry of Alban’s voice. “I didn’t hear, but whatever it was, I’m agin’ it.”

It was a legend. Alban was always “agin’” the family.

Quite frequently he was. The Kents, as a clan, instinctively supported the family viewpoint against the world. They were inclined, too, to have a scornful and low opinion of the world when it came in clash with the Kents. Coming from the superfine Cathedralism of Rood, the world, that is Earlhampton, was to them a thing of unintelligence and contempt. With ideas fixed, unreasonable, and supercilious, they were bound to clash with one who above all had a passion for honesty and fairness.

Alban couldn’t see that the Pennyweights were criminals and monsters of depravity to be conspired against in Earlhampton, because Mr. Pennyweight had proved his right to a certain piece of factory land the Kents thought ought to be theirs.

“But dammit, he’s right,” Alban cried, his eyes full of a sort of dreamy wonder at their lack of

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equity. "The deeds have proved him right. The law has supported his right."

"His wife pretended to be my best friend," Mrs. Kent said with the tragic accent of a betrayed soul. "And all the time her husband was working against us."

"But it *is* his land, always has been," Alban pointed out.

"He knew we thought it ours and wanted it," said Mrs. Kent. "That should have been enough."

"But it's his land," protested Alban. "Dad made a muddle over it, it's true, but it's Pennyweight's land. You can't be angry with a man for holding on to what is his, can you?"

"You don't see our point of view," said Mrs. Kent with dignity. "He knew your father thought that was his land, and that it is necessary to us. He was our friend, and yet he goes behind our back."

"That's rot. He's been quite aboveboard all the time. He met us fairly the moment he realised he had a claim. The friction has come from our side."

"My brother, how he loves us," said Edwin.

"Of course, we're the ones in the wrong," said Ethelfleda, her tone of the singular flat tartness that went with her flabby, pouchy face.

"*Didn't* the friction come from us?" demanded Alban. "Didn't we make it a law-court business instead of settling it frankly? And didn't we start cutting Mrs. Pennyweight and Alice and Ada?"

"A woman I've practically made, socially," sniffed

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Mrs. Kent. "She came here a little frump without even a cook-general . . ."

"Oh, Lord, what has *that* got to do with the rights and wrongs of Pennyweight's land?"

"Oh, you won't see it," snapped Ethelfleda. "You like people to crow over us."

"They didn't. They were quite friendly and were frightfully upset when you snubbed 'em."

"And serve them right, too," said Mrs. Kent. "I certainly cannot receive a woman who has worked against me in the underhand way Ida Pennyweight and her husband . . ."

"We're round at the starting-point again," sighed Alban. "Can't you people get over your personal huffiness and see that the only thing that counts is the right or wrong of the matter? Pennyweight was right. I don't suppose he felt any too good having to go for us over it, and since we knew the position from the first, I don't think we were any too clean forcing it on him."

"Alban!" cried his mother, in a horrified tone. "Why is it you seem to take a real pleasure in making your own family out to be blackguards?"

"Well, were we too clean? We knew all along we had no real right to that land, but we tried to jockey Pennyweight, went as far as lawyers would take us to try and shake an absolutely sound claim. Was that quite straight on our part? If anybody has a right to get hot it's Pennyweight. But he isn't, he's really rather sporting about it."

"He knows it's best to be in with us," said Mrs.

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Kent, grimly. "He knows that we can make things very difficult for him in Earlhampton. Very difficult."

"It's not to our credit that we used that weapon and other things to try and swing him. I think we ought to be rather humble about the whole business."

"Of course, you'd expect us to grovel in the dirt," from Ethelfleda.

"And what would you have done to settle the business on the high moral level?" asked Edwin. Edwin knew exactly how to spur Alban on to the torment of his family. It was not pure malice. He loved to get fun out of anything. Giggles from Camillus and Ethelfleda and even Dunstan showed how well they recognised that their jolly brother was pulling Alban's leg.

"Me?" said Alban, as though the question were ridiculous. "Directly I saw that the land was Pennyweight's I should have handed it back to him without a fight."

"And if, as we hoped when we fought, he had not been able to substantiate that claim?" asked Oswald, pontifically. "Remember, we did think our father bought that land. There was a doubt about Pennyweight producing proofs, you know."

"The point is, *we* knew. Directly we went into the matter we saw a mistake had been made, and that it was Pennyweight's land. We shouldn't have asked him to produce proofs. We should have handed back what was his at once. I should have, otherwise I'd have felt a thief."

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"A thief!" cried Mrs. Kent. "Are you accusing us of being thieves?"

"Yes," said Alban, "I suppose it amounts to that."

"You're ridiculous," snapped Oswald. "It was a matter of business, and in modern business . . ."

"I'm afraid," said Alban, tersely, "I'm not really what you'd call a good specimen of the modern business man."

"I fear you are not," said Oswald, grimly, and he and Mrs. Kent exchanged understanding glances.

### v

There was reason for those glances. Alban had at that time just taken up a position in the Kent Drug Company. Presently, when he had got a grip on the business and had finished a course of special chemistry at the Earlhampton University, he would become a partner with a definite say in the control. And with these wild ideas in his head!

"He's like his father," Mrs. Kent cried once more. "I never could get his father to see things sensibly. Never! I remember one terrible occasion, Oswald, when, dear good man though he was, he did immense harm to the business by refusing to deal with a man on the grounds that he sweated his workpeople. He cut himself off from a most profitable Liver and Headache Pill line that way in spite of all I could do."

"That's queer," said Oswald, staring with his

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faded, blue calico-print eyes. "Alban's been up to the same thing. He wants me to stop buying from Samsen for much the same reason. Samsen does our card-boxes, cartons, and so forth. Alban swears the man pays starvation wages, and that his girl hands can't earn enough to live on decently under his system."

"Oh, Oswald, almost his father's own words. You —you didn't listen to him?"

"Of course I didn't, Mother. It would mean nearly a farthing an article off profits on all our boxed lines. I told him not to talk rubbish and to study business. I pointed out that if we chucked Samsen, Farewells would be underselling us. *They* have no moral qualms about Samsen."

"Did he see reason?"

"Does he ever? He told me to leave Farewells to look after their own conscience. What mattered to us was ours. I told him that though sentiment might be a pretty thing, it would cost us the best part of fifteen hundred pounds."

"Yes?"

"You'll know what the young fool answered. He said that cash was less important than decent behaviour, and that in any case we had more than enough to keep us all in comfort."

"Oswald!" cried the outraged Mrs. Kent.

"Don't worry, Mother. Such talk will have no effect while *I'm* head of the business. And he'll get over it. He's probably taking in a lot of Socialistic

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stuff at the University. Most cubs go through that phase at his age."

"I wish he'd seen less of those Conroys," wailed Mrs. Kent. Alban had just become intimate with Gilda's family, though he had not yet introduced Edwin. "I'm sure they do him no good. A boy like Alban wants good influences . . . It was only after years of marriage that I could get his father to shed his extravagant ideas. I'm very fearful, Oswald. He could do immense harm if he were in power at the Works."

She and her eldest son exchanged a look that was measuring as well as anxious. There was even more than a touch of calculation in Oswald's eyes. He liked power himself and at the present moment he enjoyed it without restriction. Edwin was already a partner, of course, but Edwin was much more addicted to amusements and gaiety, to making the most of the friendship his peculiar quality of attraction drew to him, than to active interest and labour in Kent Drugs. Alban was and would be quite another proposition. With his keenness, cleverness, and real ability and his strange ideas, he would be a tough customer to tackle once he had a say in the running of the firm.

"It is a matter of anxiety," agreed Oswald, dropping his pale eyes. "But we need not worry over it yet. There is no hurry. The will gives you a free hand, Mother."

The will certainly gave Mrs. Kent a free hand. That was the reason why Alban at twenty-three

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was not a partner, though Edwin had been made one at twenty-one. Alban held a sort of indeterminate managership with special duties in the laboratory, but Mrs. Kent saw to it that he had no hold whatsoever until she had made up her mind about his character.

### vi

The whole family agreed with Mrs. Kent that Alban was dangerous, that his attitude was always against the family interests.

It wasn't true. Alban could be just as "difficult" to the enemies of the family if the occasion arose. In fact he was inclined to support the right for their sakes even more resolutely than themselves.

He fought, for example, for Rosamund when she wanted to take up art, though perhaps that couldn't be counted as a virtue, since the rest of the family was tepidly against Rosamund. He did fight, anyhow, against the conservative negation and hostility of Mrs. Kent and Oswald and the antagonistic attitude of the rest. And he forced them all to see that they were wrong, and that Rosamund had every right to be what she desired. "It's what *she* wants," he said. "You may not agree, but you aren't living her life for her, are you? And since you aren't, you can't interfere with her ambitions."

He even defeated Aunt Heppie, who had turned her big, social guns against a girl determined to do what no "ladylike" girl should want to do. Out-

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pointed in her arguments, the old termagant had tried to crush Alban with sarcasm.

"You're pretty high-and-mighty about this, young man. Are you the one to pay for these low, new-fangled ways?"

"Of course, I'm not."

"I thought not. Easy to give orders when you don't have to pay the piper."

"Nobody has to pay the piper," said Alban. "My father's will has provided for all that."

"What?" cried Mrs. Kent, aghast.

"What do you know about the will?" demanded an uneasy Oswald, particularising his mother's consternation. It was the aim of Mrs. Kent and her eldest son to keep the contents of the will mysterious, mystical, and sacred to the younger children.

"I know *that*," said Alban, calmly. "The will says that if any child, irrespective of sex, wishes to branch out in a calling outside of Kent Drugs, such part of his or her interest in Kent Drugs is to be utilised to provide for that child's following that calling. The thing's plain, and I've talked it over with Rosamund. She is willing to forego her interest in Kent Drugs, as the will ordains, in order to take up art. You can't stand against her."

"Your father intended me to use my discretion," said his mother, appalled by Alban's familiarity with the will.

"The will doesn't say that."

"But, of course, your father means it. I'm your mother."

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"I don't think that's quite accurate," said Alban, imperturbably. "If Father meant you to have a say, he would have made a point of it. He was quite specific on other matters—about the partnerships, for instance."

Mrs. Kent looked alarmed and Oswald looked sheepish. They had adopted the attitude up to this that Alban, in some vague way, had failed to notice that he had not been made a partner at twenty-one. His mere mention of the matter, his uncanny knowledge of the will, killed the opposition to Rosamund. She got her art schooling. It was given to her lavishly, the whole family combining as though they alone had fought for her. Alban's part in the matter was overlooked, and Oswald and his mother hoped that the concession would help Alban also to overlook the fact that not only wasn't he a partner, but that no steps were being taken to make him one.

## vii

Alban's "difficulties" had been of benefit to the family even more decisively in other ways. He had even been the champion of Edwin.

Edwin at one period had found employment for his genial and gregarious qualities in some sort of social welfare work in Earlhampton. It was work that suited his lively, hail-fellow-well-met nature. He did it admirably. He had charm, he had such a quick good humour, he had such a fascination for many people that he soon strengthened his organisa-

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tion. His good work as committee-man and secretary made it certain that he would be elected acting president for the year in question.

It was then, however, that a "Big Bug" in Earlhampton civic life took a hand. This Importance had learnt privately from City Council sources that a minor royalty was to visit the city, and one of the items on her programme would be an inspection of one of the welfare work hostels. The Big Man did not care in the slightest about the welfare work, but he did care about pushing himself and his family forward. And as his son was on Edwin's committee, he felt that it would be a fine thing if his son were the one to receive and show royalty round the hostel and be much photographed and paragraphed in consequence.

With this ambition in view he began to pull wires to have his son elected acting president instead of Edwin, and, being an old campaigner and a power in the land, there is no doubt he would have gained the day if Alban had not intervened.

Edwin did not put up much of a fight. The Kents did not fight at all. They were furious, they deplored the meanness of the thing, it was a crying shame . . . but they could do nothing, they could not really be parties to a public squabble.

Alban argued that mere seeing that a thing was wrong wasn't enough. One should be active in virtue. He was. He went straight to the Big Bug and gave him a candid view of the injustice of his plan. He went even as far as threatening an exposure

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in the press. The family trembled at the fierceness of his ardour and the threat of scandal it promised. But he stuck to his guns and won.

The Big Bug climbed down, and his son was not elected acting president. Whether Alban had awakened his sense of justice, or whether threatened publicity so close to Council elections had scared him, matters little. He surrendered.

Though Edwin had triumphed and the family preened itself, their opinion of Alban did not change. He was still the difficult one.

It was even so after he had championed Camillus.

Camillus had a pretty taste in the uses of advertisement, and was training himself to take over the publicity side of the Kent Drug Company. In the process of this training he was the victim of an unscrupulous School of Advertising.

This school, teaching with marvellous inefficiency through the medium of the post, had with greater talent than its methods of tuition indicated, entered a set of designs made by Camillus in the course of his studies for a prize given by a great trading firm. The designs won the prize, but the school remained modestly mum on the matter. It was only when the advertisements appeared in the press that Camillus and the family recognised that they had been robbed of some few hundred pounds of good cash, to say no more.

The family was hugely indignant again, and Camillus himself inclined to rush up to town to read the riot act to the school. It was Oswald and

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Mrs. Kent who shuddered away from the crude brutality of insisting upon their rights, in public maybe. Camillus was counselled to go slow, and Camillus, who had an unfaltering instinct for marching with the herd, was inclined to fall into line.

But not Alban.

Alban at once insisted that the proprietors of the school were thieves and should be dealt with as thieves. An insolent, plausible letter from them promising the full shame of the open courts of law simply stiffened him, though it made Mrs. Kent and Oswald more inclined than ever to drop the matter.

"It only means trouble. There is nothing to be gained by stirring up muddy waters," they cried.

"They know that attitude, they're banking on it," said Alban. "The very tone of the letter tells you that they are trying to scare us that way. But we've got to face it. It's a duty."

"Duty! Don't be silly. If we like to let this matter drop it's nobody's concern but ourselves," said Mrs. Kent.

"But it isn't. This is a public matter. It's because people like us shirk their duty that thieves can carry on with immunity. It's our job as citizens to act."

"Oh, Lord, he's off again," grinned Edwin. "Public weal and private discomfort. . . . Duty! Fat lot the world cares about our doing our duty."

"That doesn't matter. The thing is *we* ought to care. We're members of the community, and it's up to all of us to keep the community safe and clean."

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"You're a sort of morbid moral dustman," sneered Edwin.

"We all ought to be that," smiled Alban. He quite appreciated Edwin's humour, even if he couldn't get the chap to see his point of view. "Look at the matter this way. Unless we teach these scoundrels that their tricks are risky, we're leaving them free to rob the next man who comes along. You see what I mean, we're morally responsible for the robbery in that way. And their next victim may be a poor student who can't afford to lose the money or stand up for his rights as we can. By scotching the brutes now, we're doing not only our public duty, but making the world a little safer for our fellows."

"Why should we help people we don't know? Why should we put ourselves to this trouble for others?" asked Mrs. Kent, loftily.

Alban stared at her: "I say," he said with wide eyes, "aren't you a Christian? Don't you realise what is the very basis of Christian teaching?"

"How dare you," cried his mother, in a tone thick with horror. "You are being blasphemous as well as coarse—and unfilial."

"Well, then," continued Alban, as though thinking it out as he spoke, "since we're only officially Christians, look at it from a practical point of view. Can't you see that if everyone thought only of his own advantage in the world, it would soon become entirely unfit to live in?"

"It's going that way fast, anyhow," grinned Edwin.

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"It is, because more and more people think of themselves rather than the common weal. And that's why it's up to us, everyone of us, to do what we can to stop the rot."

"Oh, shut up," cried Edwin. "We've heard it all before. Keep to the point. It doesn't please us to go wallowing in publicity for the sake of a fad. And we won't."

"I will," said Alban.

And he did. He did it with rather astonishing ease. He bearded the two principals of the school in their dirty back office and put the fear of law and jail into their hearts. A letter admitting that a slight error had been made came from the school, and a cheque for the several hundred pounds, less commission, which Camillus had won.

Curiously enough, that deepened, rather than not, the family's conviction that Alban was a crank and a danger to the family.

## viii

Perhaps there was an element of right in this attitude. Your apostles of pure duty and rightness are explosive individuals in a world where such virtues are theoretical rather than practical.

"A young Bayard," as old Conroy, Gilda's father, called Alban, "in his zeal sometimes exposes things best left covered."

With Edwin a member of the Kent family something like that was bound to happen. Indeed it

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was actually while championing Edwin that Alban discovered the true nature of his elder brother.

It was in his early days at the Factory. He was still giving part of his time to studying chemistry under old Conroy at the University. He had already paid several visits to Moap's Farm, too, and had become what Oswald called "an infernal nuisance" by his interest in the drug properties of herbs.

A factor that gave peculiar violence to the revelation was that Alban had only lately introduced Edwin to Gilda Conroy and the freedom of the Conroy's beautiful Georgian house.

Alban picked up the rumour of Edwin and a woman at the University. It was probably flung at him as a ribald joke. He was furious at it, even as a joke. Not merely because it was unclean and about his own brother, but because, like many people, he was inclined to play hero-worshipper to the vivid, jolly, dashing Edwin. Angry, he said to Oswald across his desk at the Factory the day after he had heard the slander:

"Look here, Oswald, in case it gets to your ears, I heard a foul libel about Edwin yesterday. It's apparently about a good deal. I gave it the lie, of course, and pass the hint, so that you'll be ready to do the same."

Oswald looked stolidly at his desk for half a minute, his woolly mind wondering whether he ought to leave this alone, or whether it would be wiser to head off Alban.

"What was it you heard?"

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"It was quite disgusting. It coupled Edwin with a woman, the daughter of a pub-keeper in Seneschal Street. Gertie Woodrun is the name. It's the worst kind of slander. They say, he's supposed to—to have gone the whole hog. I'm going to get to the bottom of it and make the cad who started it sit up."

"Oh, I say, don't do that. I mean—I really wouldn't," cried Oswald, in fright.

"But, my dear chap, I can't sit down under a vile story like that about my brother."

"I know. But no good ever came of stirring up mud. It only makes matters worse."

"Good God, that seems to suggest that Edwin . . ."

"Don't be a fool," snapped Oswald. "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm merely saying that you know what these stories are, and how dangerous it is to make any sort of outcry about them. You see Edwin *is* racketty . . . ."

"Racketty, yes, I suppose he is a bit. But, hang it all, that's no reason for accusing him of carrying on with a barmaid."

"I know—I know," cried Oswald, irritably. "Why do you jump so at things, Alban? What I mean is that many people know he is wild, and are ready to believe anything. If you stir things up, the idea will spread, and you can never catch up with it. Let this thing alone. Don't make it public property."

"I don't quite see how I can stand by and hear my own brother befouled," said Alban. "One must smash a lie."

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"You *must* stop him," cried Mrs. Kent, when Oswald told her of this conversation. "Oh, what a terrible trouble that boy is."

"How can I?" asked Oswald, sullenly, feeling that he had all the burdens of the world on his shoulders. "How can I prevent him hearing the truth? Edwin's done that for us, the little low hound."

"It wasn't his fault," said Mrs. Kent, indignantly. "That *creature* hunted him, I'm certain. No son of mine would do a thing like that."

"Oh, well," muttered the disillusioned Oswald, for the habits of Edwin were not new to him. "That doesn't matter now. The girl's in trouble, and her father is making himself most unpleasant about it."

"He would," said Mrs. Kent, viciously. "He'd do anything to catch a Kent. That was what she was aiming at, the creature."

"We're talking about Alban and the impossibility of hiding this from him. With all the talk about and with old Woodrun coming round to the office and creating disturbances, he's bound to hear. And before that he'll have raised the devil himself, defending Edwin. How can I stop him?"

"You simply must, Oswald. He'll make a real scandal of it just when we are managing to keep it dark. And what will he do to Edwin when he hears? With his strange ideas—he'll kill Edwin. And then there'll be another scandal. Oh, what have I done to have such a son!"

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"None of that explains how you think I am going to stop him," said Oswald, doggedly.

"I know, but we *must* stop him. Must."

"The only thing I can think of is to send him to this Moap's Farm he's so fond of. I mean, to work there."

"The Herb Farm? But you don't want that, do you, Oswald? You say yourself he's wasting too much attention on that already, and getting cranky ideas about herbs as medicines. Sending him there will be encouraging him."

"I can't think of anything else. I know he's getting cranky on herbs, but on the other hand if we bundle him off there for a month or so, while I deal with Woodrun, he'll be out of harm's way until the affair has blown over. A month oughtn't to hurt him. In fact it might cure him, for Moap isn't doing at all well, and Alban is business man enough to be impressed by failure."

"Ye-es, it would be a way out, Oswald, if he doesn't suspect. You've been against his visits to the Farm."

"He won't suspect. Why should he? And then, as it happens, he's just going into the herbal drugs—belladonna, henbane, horehound, and the rest. I'll make that an excuse for giving him his chance of studying the drugs from the beginning. That'll satisfy him. Alban likes to master the whole process from the ground up. I'll write to Moap at once."

Oswald wrote and when he received a letter from

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the owner of the herb garden in the west two days later he congratulated himself on having brilliantly negotiated the difficulty with Alban.

But he had not. Before he could call his younger brother into his office, Alban walked in himself. One glance at the lean, pointed face, now pale and almost sick with horror and disgust, told Oswald that the worst had happened.

For once Oswald rose to a condition of mind emphatic, reasonably clear-headed, and direct. The combination of worries and evil circumstances had vanquished his habitual woolliness. He said at once:

“Oh, I was just sending for you, Alban. I wanted to have a chat about those drugs you are handling. It seems—”

“Oswald,” began Alban, in a thick voice, but his brother went on ruthlessly:

“It seems to me that the best way for you to master all the processes is to see the plant from the growing onward. I’ve been in touch with Moap. He tells me he is just putting in his belladonna, and so on. That’s a good thing. If you go at once you’ll see the drug from the planting. So I’ve arranged with Moap, and he’s willing to take you in. You’ll like that, I know, for it’s experience you’ve always wanted . . .”

“Oh, yes . . . I’ve always wanted it. . . . Only, I say, Oswald, that story about Edwin . . .”

“Well, that’s settled,” said Oswald, briskly. “Moap is holding his planting until you arrive, so

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you must lose no time. I've spoken to your mother . . .”

“Oswald?”

“She has everything ready for you. Catch the afternoon train. You'll be in the fields at Margaretting at dawn. That will . . .”

“Damn you, shut up!” shouted Alban, crashing his fist on the desk and glaring with sick eyes at the dumbfounded Oswald. They glared for a moment. Then, without taking his eyes from his brother, Alban pulled a chair forward and sat in it.

“You've got to understand, I mean to talk to you about Edwin,” he said.

“Go on,” said Oswald, curtly.

“I've found out about Edwin and the Woodrun girl. It's true.”

“It is,” said Oswald.

“You knew all the time?”

“For weeks.”

“And you kept it from me?”

“Don't you think it is the sort of thing I *would* keep from you?”

“I see . . . it was too filthy?” That wasn't the whole reason, but Oswald let it pass. “And it's a definite fact that Edwin and this girl have—did—?”

“It's true.”

“And the father is raising hell?”

“Yes.”

“My God,” groaned Alban. “The cad, the filthy cad.”

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"He is," snapped Oswald. "But I know how to deal with him."

"Who?" cried Alban, lifting a white face and wide eyes. "Edwin?"

"I was talking of the father."

"I was talking of Edwin."

"You would," said Oswald, curtly.

"Can you defend him?" cried Alban with so fierce a passion that Oswald shrank back. "She isn't the first, you know."

"I know," said Oswald.

"There was a sweet-shop girl, Emily something—"

"All right, I know."

"And there are other, casual women. And there's this widow, Mrs. Hogarth."

"You needn't go through the catalogue," snapped Oswald. "I know it."

"It's awful. Awful—the utter beast! The swine. To think that my brother . . . ."

"Don't forget he *is* your brother," said Oswald.

"That makes it worse," moaned Alban. "Much worse."

Oswald with his unexpected new power took command of the situation.

"I'm sorry you got to know of these things, Alban," he said. "I—your mother and I (yes, she knows) tried to keep them away from you. Sending you to Moap's Farm is part of our plan for keeping you out of this. You must go there . . . ."

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"Why should I be out of it?" blazed Alban.  
"Why should I shirk?"

"What should you do?" snarled Oswald. "Where do you think you come in?"

"Why—why," said Alban, "why, to back you up, to force that beast to marry . . ." He saw the look in Oswald's eyes. "My God, you *aren't* going to make him marry her?"

"A girl of that class? Don't be a fool."

"Her social status was high enough for seduction," cried Alban.

"Don't be filthy. And don't rant. There isn't a question of marriage. No—no, cut out all that high-falutin' talk about the wronged girl. It doesn't come in. Apart from anything else the girl *won't* marry him."

"Won't? You mean she's been persuaded by you and . . .?"

"I mean she *won't* of her own accord. Her father would like to make that a point, but she *won't* do it. She seems to hate Edwin, actually to be afraid of him. . . ."

That was like a dash of water in Alban's face. That a girl who had known and loved Edwin should hate him, was too startling. That his brother had proved himself vile, he admitted, but that that genial, captivating, vivid fellow should engender hate and fear, seemed illogical.

"I can't believe that," he said stiffly. "She's been got at."

"Believe it or not, the girl makes no mistakes about

her feelings for Edwin. She says he's cold-blooded and cruel. 'A fiend' is one of her expressions. Strong, of course, but it's real fear of him that makes her refuse marriage—even if she had the chance."

"Her mind is warped by her tragedy," said Alban. "That's not Edwin's character at all. If I saw her, I could persuade . . ."

"We'll have none of that," Oswald thundered. "This is my business, understand, mine and your mother's alone. We'll have no interference. It's difficult enough as it is, without extra trouble. I'm dealing with this as I dealt with the others."

"You had to handle the others?"

"It's the eldest brother's privilege," said Oswald, bitterly. "I'll do now as I did before—satisfy the girl and her father and keep things quiet. I do it alone, understand. We've got to prevent this scandal spreading."

"But everybody knows about it. I ought to stay and face . . ."

"Very few people—know. A certain few make jokes about it because they have heard rumours, but very few actually *know*. You don't think Woodrun wants the story of his daughter's trouble all over the town, do you?"

"No," breathed Alban, "no. Poor girl."

"She may be that or not," said Oswald, tartly. "She has to be protected, anyhow, and I'm doing my best. You'll only make matters worse by butting in. Perhaps you've made 'em worse already. I think

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you'd better go home now and pack up for Moap's Farm."

"Yes, I'd better," said Alban, getting up in a dazed fashion. "You're right. I'd better be out of this. . . . I couldn't be in the same house with Edwin, anyhow, I—I want to tear his damned throat out, the brute, the filthy-minded brute. To think . . . ."

"That'll do. I've dealt with Edwin. You've got to remember, anyhow, that Edwin is built on different lines from you."

"You can't excuse a man like that."

"You'll probably find you can, as you grow wiser," said Oswald. "But I'm not excusing him. He's done a blackguard thing, and he always was unreliable and racketty . . . . But we won't discuss him."

"I feel sick," cried Alban. "To think that he's mixed with decent people! Why, I've even introduced him to the Conroys. To think of him being friendly with Old Conroy and Gilda . . . ."

"Nothing to be gained by going through this over and over again. Better get along to your packing, Alban. And don't take it so tragically. It's beastly, I'll admit, but—well, it's happened before to quite a number of young men, men the world thinks no worse of now."

"The world's rotten, then," cried Alban. "Rotten."

## *Chapter III*

### i

ALL this happened fourteen months before Aunt Heppie's venomous tongue had started the tragedy afresh.

For two months following his interview with Oswald, Alban had worked on Moap's Farm, worked on the Bottom facing the view of beauty along the sea edge, worked in the soft airs among the herbs he loved, the old simples with song-like names that were beginning to grow into a peculiar passion of his.

His interest in "botanical" pharmacy waxed, rather than waned as Oswald had hoped. He even came in a measure to share old Moap's distinctly uncommercial obsession for the strange, old, half-forgotten herbs that had formed the everyday routine of the old wives' healing.

Old Moap, with the lean, high-featured face of a beardless patriarch, with his seven hundred years of yeoman lore behind him, and his curious, fine, and serene culture, was a type to inspire enthusiasms. And he was not without his dry humour.

"Buyers from the big houses have their jokes," he would smile in his slow way. "They ask for the brains of a horned toad killed at the new moon, or

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the hairs from a black dog's tail, or dried lizards, and the rest of the old witch-woman's mumbo-jumbo, and those are fool things of course, Mr. Alban. But it seems to me that God or, if you like, Nature—I prefer God—didn't put certain things into this world for nothing. The old folk, who saw that the animals got cured of illnesses by eating weeds, weren't far wrong in choosing those weeds to cure humans. It seems to me natural to go to Nature for our cures."

Or again:

"Why differentiate? The Pharmacopœia admits that Belladonna, and White Horehound, Coltsfoot, and Dill are first-class natural remedies. Why not Marigold tea for measles, Sengreen for weak eyes, and Sage for sore throats? . . . The old wives proved 'em."

Under the calm and beauty of the Farm and in the preoccupation of working in the "weed" garden and the potting and drying sheds, Alban was soothed. He began even to see Edwin's behaviour more as a folly than as a tragedy.

The life suited him, absorbed him even more than the work at the Factory. In fact it was his ardent praise of herbs, to the detraction of the mineral derivatives and synthetics that made the bulk of the Kent Drug Company's output, that frightened the conservative Oswald into recalling him.

Oswald had visions of an iconoclastic Alban sweeping out of doors all the cachets, pills, capsules, powders, tabloids, fluids, and crystals that brought

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in so solid an income, and filling the factory with the despised Woundworts and weeds, the flowers, herbs, fungus, bulbs, roots, hips, barks, seeds, resins, berries, stems, and corms of his old wives' pharmacy.

That would be just the thing a madman like Alban would do if he got control, Oswald argued. It wasn't, for Alban was a business man and no fool, but the thought became almost a mania with Oswald, and the reason why Alban's chance of partnership became more and more remote.

To set off this dangerous inclination towards herbs was Alban's calmer attitude towards Edwin. Mrs. Kent's tactful letters had completed the work the beauty and serenity of Moap's Farm had begun. They had made it plain that Edwin had turned over a new leaf, that he had learnt his lesson and become a better man. The "affair" was finished, and whatever scandal had been attached to it had blown over. Alban was given to understand that any reopening of the matter on his part would be more than likely to wreck his brother's chance of rehabilitation and repentance. And of course that made a powerful appeal. Alban was the last man to spoil anyone's chance of going straight.

Indeed the news was a blessed relief to him. He might hate his brother's beastliness, but it wasn't in him to hate anyone, let alone Edwin, whose brightness, gaiety, and charm of irresponsibility gave so much vivacity to the family life.

That vivacity, it is true, was showing more and more a touch of malice. Edwin was developing a

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tendency to “get at” Alban, to make him the butt of the table. There was a sort of secret antagonism in this, arising no doubt from a clash of characters. It was because of this “baiting” on Edwin’s part that Oswald sent him to travel in the North for the firm about the time of Alban’s return.

In Edwin and Alban Oswald and his mother realised they had two elements that must come together in an explosion one day.

### ii

There was no explosion. The family life went on smoothly up to and beyond Edwin’s engagement to Gilda Conroy.

Alban had been startled and bewildered by that. Not because he now doubted the straightness of his brother, for beyond Edwin’s usual casualness in business and his private in consequence there hadn’t been a hint of anything wrong. The shock came from the fact that Gilda had been able to love such a man as Edwin.

His first impression of Gilda Conroy remained the abiding impression.

Conroy, attracted by the dreamer in Alban and finding him less of a “damn machine-minded materialist” than the other youths to whom he taught “the constantly conflicting exact science of chemistry,” had invited him to his home.

Old Conroy’s home was startling if you only knew him as the brilliant demonstrator of science at the

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University, but it was absolutely like the Conroy who showed himself to his intimates.

Conroy's home air was as dreamy and as mystical as a fairy play of Maeterlinck. It had a dim, soft, fantastic atmosphere, vaguely, tenuously suggesting a beauty opalescently misty and conspicuously unreal. An astonishing home for a man whose business in life was the clear-cut facts of the laboratory.

But perhaps not. Perhaps it was a swing-back from hard facts. Certainly in his home Old Conroy declared his abhorrence of hard facts, his contempt for exact science.

"Anything that breeds a race of hard-faced, cock-sure, bronze-minded young men and the novels of Mr. Wells must be fundamentally wrong," he declared. "This heresy of exact science—all wrong. It's making us machines, not human beings."

He had no use for science, this brilliant scientist.

"I know too much about it. The new religion of our enlightened age, they want to call it, the pure, unbiased cult of decisive truth that soars in its balanced calm above the squabbling creeds of quarrelling theologians. . . . Well, just you listen while I read how this Archbishop of Physics proves a brother Cardinal of the cult a liar, heretic, and worse."

He would read out with immense gusto some vehement controversy of scientists on a matter in which each was assured that his own verdict was the final one.

"Calmness, balance, the triumph of truth," he would jeer. "That sounds like it, doesn't it? Tor-

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quemada or Luther couldn't have been stronger or more certain of infallibility. And it's the same through all your exact sciences. All of them spend their lives laying down final dogmas which the next man proves utterly wrong."

For him the only exact science was the lovely inexactness of life. He put humanity in all its delicious contradictions and the inexplicable mysticism of beauty before everything. His house in quaint Guard God Street, where the ancient walls of Earlhampton marched down to the modern port, was filled with a dim air of tempered and ecstatic beauty.

Loveliness in pictures, prints, statuettes, mellow furniture, foods even, gave it an air that somehow took the mind back to the Renaissance, and the men and women gathered there also in a queer way suggested the wraiths of long-dead hunters of beauty.

Rather a tenuous and desiccated crew, these intimates of the Conroys, dwelling on lovely things with language so carefully chosen, so austere thought and phrased that listening to them one heard the English tongue as a dead language, beautiful but bloodless.

To Alban Conroy's only child, Gilda, was the very soul of the house and these gatherings. Her slim, resilient figure with its casque of gilt hair, the pure serenity of her good looks, the sense of fragility about her—in spite of her clean, hard health and springy strength—her quietness, her candour, her fastidiousness, her sympathy, the breadth and rich-

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ness of her reading, her trained and instinctive love of all that was beautiful, made her the natural spirit of her home. A vital spirit, yes, more real and robust than the house. She was warm flesh and blood, gentle, tender, generous, ardent, and more than ardent. She beat with life, was impulsive and quick with life, the one living organism in the dead, exquisite air of her environment.

How could a girl who was like that fall in love with Edwin?

Edwin was short and stocky. His broad-blocked shoulders and thin short legs gave him an air of clumsiness. How did that top-heavy figure appeal to eyes so accustomed to beauty?

His face was long but rather bull-doggy about the jowl. It had that salmon tint that looked out-of-door and healthy, but would presently harshen to a dry, brittle redness. Not bad-looking, certainly, but just a trifle coarse-grained, though his intensely blue eyes gave his face a vivid air of wordly geniality, of always being in on the joke of life.

His mind was racy, yes. It could carry on a rippling, unwearying conversation of current gaiety. It could, with a sudden genius, twist a conversation into a shout of laughter by an almost breathless suppleness of humour. A comedian's mind, if you like, frivolous, ribald, irreverent, daring, graceless, but always the mind of a good companion. But outside that, what was there to satisfy Gilda? Edwin, apart from specific papers he was careful not to leave about where his mother would see them, did not

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read. He did not even see, for beauty in any shape outside women left him blank. Nor did he listen. He was simply the direct antithesis to Gilda and to all Gilda stood for.

Perhaps that was it.

Alban recalled Edwin's first meeting with Gilda, on his introduction. It had been at a dance. He remembered how Edwin had come shouldering his way through the rather ethereal and willowy men who crowded round Gilda. He stood out by contrast. He looked bold, virile, abounding in masculine. Amid that limp crew, he looked like a rough, jovial Pan creature come to carry off the wood-nymph, Alban thought.

And he had carried her off. He had swept aside the pale human lilies with the animal vigour of his gesture, left them limp and inadequate as he rushed Gilda off in a sweep of almost boisterous gaiety.

And Gilda obviously enjoyed it. Alban had never realised that Gilda could romp—or might want to. He realised that he had never heard her laugh as Edwin made her laugh. He thought her a person of quiet smiles and ripples of pleasure. That she was capable of such youthful, zestful, hearty enjoyment had never entered his head. He had made his own picture of her and as it were pinned her into the frame of it. It was really as though Edwin had seen the real youth, had rescued this princess from her life among delicate ghosts, and had swept her into the strong sunlight of the life she desired.

That was it, maybe. While the admiration of

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others had kept her bound to her own attenuate environment, Edwin alone had given her an escape into the larger life. She was intoxicated by it, and intoxicated by the personality of the man who had freed her. And Edwin, he had undoubtedly been drawn by the charm of her difference. Her serene and fastidious beauty must have been an exquisite pleasure after the bolder, less reticent charms he was accustomed to.

That probably was the explanation of this astonishing coming together. In any case the engagement was soon a fact, and it was apparently satisfactory. Gilda showed herself intensely happy, and Edwin, it seemed, had found the woman who was to help him lead a newer and finer life.

### iii

The real reason for Alban's revolt against the engagement was himself, although he was unconscious of this until the serpent tongue of Aunt Heppie opened his eyes.

Alban and Gilda had been good friends until Edwin monopolised her. There was from the first that in their nature that bound them together. He had visited old Conroy because he liked him and because of the beauty and serenity of the house, Alban thought. His real reason had been Gilda.

She filled him with a delight in her beauty that was practically awe. She gave him a companionship such as he had never had and never expected to have

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until he met her. It was not merely that they had most of their tastes in common, it was that their instincts were so astonishingly in tune.

Gilda understood Alban even in his wildest fads —only she called them ideals. That struggling, urgent “something” which the Kent family found so irritating she saw at once as a clean spirit fighting its way to a finer aspect of life.

When Alban looked at her with his dreamy eyes, steel-bright from some light within, and cried: “I suppose I put it badly, perhaps even I’m an ass, but I can’t make people see that it’s *us* who count, the self here” (thumping her chest). “We’re the key to the good of the world. If only each one of us would do always the right, the straight, the fair, the decent thing, the world would be all right!”—when he said things like that, she understood and would say:

“I know. It is the business of every man to save his own soul, for by that means the whole world of souls is saved. After all, that’s just plain Christianity, Alban.”

“Well—yes, perhaps. And, after all, has the world found anything better than just plain Christianity, Gilda? When you go back through all the creeds and the ‘isms,’ the new cults, the New Thoughts, the Modern Gospels of Humanity, you find that after all you would have saved an immense amount of trouble by beginning at the beginning and sticking to plain Christianity. There’s nothing in all the new creeds and movements that isn’t already in plain Christianity, and nobody has ever put a new

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brick or a new virtue into the fabric—not even Mrs. Eddy, or all the collected spirits of Conan Doyle, or the emancipations of Lenin. There's nothing wrong with Christianity as a practical system, though there's an awful lot wrong with Christians."

"I see that, and you don't think that the failure of people to be good Christians implies that Christianity as a practical system doesn't fit modern human beings."

"Perhaps—I don't know. No, I don't think so. No more than the fact that police methods having failed to stamp out crime implies that the whole human race is criminal. The failures come from the human side, not from Christianity, from the greediness and indiscipline of man. Some people haven't the guts for it. It is easier to be selfish than good. We're all like that, I suppose. But you can't blame a system if people don't attempt to carry it out, no more than you can blame the brakes for a motor smash if you didn't apply them. And you can't deny that Christianity is a good working system if we'd only live up to it. Nobody has ever denied it. People have only said it was difficult, incompatible, and that's only another way of saying that they preferred enjoying themselves, that they haven't the strength of will to discipline themselves. It's foolish talk to say Christianity is hard. That's what it's got to be if it's to do any good. It's the discipline that counteracts the riot of our appetites. Anything worth while must be a discipline. There's no escaping that law. Why, you've got to discipline

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yourself even to be a good Communist or Socialist or any other 'ist.' And Christianity does get down to fundamentals. That 'saving your own soul' is the most practical working-rule ever uttered."

"Some people reject it as a doctrine of pure self."

"All doctrines that better self are doctrines of self. You've got to begin on self, first because it's the unit of social life, second because it's no good looking at your neighbour and saying, 'Well, he's simply fat with vices, he ought to try and be a better citizen,' because he can say exactly the same of you. Whereas if you act well and perfect yourself he can't say a thing, and if he does, you can't, and it goes on all the way through human society."

"That's the wisdom of Christianity," smiled Gilda. "It doesn't say, Leave things over until you can meet together and form a confraternity or a borough council or a government and legislate the world into goodness."

"By by-laws or Militarism or Socialism and so forth."

"That's it. It says, Look after yourself. If each individual sees to it that he or she is just, honest, kindly, loves his neighbour as he does himself, acts cleanly, there'll be no need for by-laws or legislation. I remember being in a town on the Continent. In that town each householder was responsible for the cleaning of the street over his own frontage and to the middle of the carriage-way, where he linked up with the cleaning of the house opposite. As a result of each individual's doing his whack of cleaning,

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that town has a reputation for being the cleanest in the world. That's a sort of Christianity. The sum total of individual efforts made the whole perfect."

"Yes, that's what I'm trying to get at, and it's so hard to make others see it, especially the reverse of the picture; that is, that by giving way to weakness and meanness we're letting the world down; that every time we are weak, uncharitable, unclean, dishonest we sin, not merely against God and laws, but against the community, against all humanity. You'd think they'd see it plain, because after all God and laws *are* humanity, but in the present wallow of individuality and indisciplined grabbing after self-interest, laws and God are treated as though they were something quite aside from self—anyhow, in private action. But, I say, do I bore you with my vapours?"

"Of course you don't, Alban. It's interesting. It seems to me that what you say is the only sound course of conduct. I have always thought so."

"Splendid, we always do seem to think along the same lines, don't we?"

## iv

That was true, they found themselves looking with the same eyes on most things—character, beauty, even humour.

To Gilda, for instance, Moap's Farm and the country district of Margarettting in which it was

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situated had much the same meaning as it had to Alban.

It had no meaning at all to the Kent family save as an expression of Alban's faddiness. Gilda, indeed, was rather suspect because she talked of it as the most perfect holiday place she knew.

The Kent ideas of a place for a holiday did not coincide. Mrs. Kent, Ethelfleda, and Rosamund, betrayed by the enthusiasms of Alban, had tried it for what two of them considered one of the most appalling weeks of their lives. Rosamund found for it an enthusiasm equal to Alban's. But, then, she wasn't normal, she was artistic. Moreover she, in her less emphatic way, showed that many of the worse symptoms of Alban's nature flowered also in her.

Emphatically Mrs. Kent and Ethelfleda did not like Margarettting. From them one recognised that a family tomb was a fount of gaiety by comparison. It had no cinema, it had no theatre, there was no promenade, there was nothing at all "to do." At Margarettting one simply sat stagnant, confronting unlimited masses of scenery and the Atlantic ocean.

The Kents had no particular use for scenery. It was, no doubt, a great asset to the picture postcard industry, and it was useful as an anodyne when dealing with visitors not conversant with Earlhampton gossip nor inclined to discuss frocks or servants. But scenery as the sole companion of one's moments of leisure was an unmitigated bore.

Like many families living dull and stagnant lives the Kents liked their holidays full and feverish.

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They went to places where there was something “to do” every precious minute, where there was no need for them to sink back and rely upon themselves. Margaretting forced them to do that. And the rooms at Margaretting were without a bath-room.

“We had to slide ourselves into a hip-bath,” Ethelfleda cried in humorous horror. “It was appalling, curling oneself up in that totally inadequate thimble. Sometimes we stuck. I know the secret feeling of sardines now—if sardines have feelings.”

Margaretting, to them, was one obsessing bath. But it meant a great deal to Gilda. She had spent many holidays there simply because there was no cinema, or theatre, or “monkey parade,” and because she did not let small baths bulk between her and beauty.

The family, rather suspicious of anyone who dared to extract a son by marriage from the Kent family group, were confirmed in their knowledge that Gilda Conroy was rather strange, and the prospective alliance rather dubious.

But to Alban her attitude gave her an added glamour. She knew and gloried in Margaretting as he knew and gloried in it.

She even liked the people there, whom the Kents thought so stodgy. She liked the brisk old character who had insisted upon his grand-daughter being christened Angina because it was a pretty name, and because he had a tender feeling for something that had been with him so long.

She liked Alban’s picture of old Moap, tall, lean,

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austere, quizzical, and patriarchal, wandering among his simples with singing names, his dog Moreover at his heel.

"Moreover?" Gilda asked. "That's a quaint name for a dog."

"Biblical," said Alban, drily.

"Biblical, how?"

"Moap says it is. Moreover is an Irish terrier, and I thought he was called to some Irish fancy. But old Moap said no, his family is prone to Old Testament names, and the dog's name came from the same source."

"Is the name Moreover in the Bible?" cried Gilda.  
"I can't believe it."

"Just what I said. But old Moap quoted a verse from the story of Dives and Lazarus that goes: 'And Moreover the dog licked his sores.' "

"He must be an original, I should love to meet him," said Gilda when she had finished laughing.

"You will, and he is an original. That's why his farm as a *Materia Medica* farm doesn't pay as it should. He treats it as a sort of medieval fancy, being more inclined to pay attention to some old herb than to his paying fields of Belladonna. For instance, the last time I was there he scarcely had the patience to discuss an improved strain he'd got in yarrow because he was so full of an old idea about laurels being useful as a protection against lightning. He'd read somewhere that the Emperor Tiberius wore laurel wreaths for this reason, and he had a wild theory of using the leaves to counteract the in-

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creasing electrical forces which modern times have loosed. It was his idea that the present tendency towards neurosis might be checked by the leaves."

"That doesn't sound quite balanced, Alban."

"He isn't, actually. He's a sweet old madman when he talks of his simples. On the other hand no one can be more sound and practical. He's improved the strains of certain drug plants so tremendously that they can defy the German, Austrian, and Balkan growers even at cut-throat rates. If he gave himself wholly to practical cultivation he'd make a fair, if not a big, income, instead of working at a loss."

"Can he go on at a loss?"

"He can't, and he's beginning to realise it. He is willing to sell out—if I'll buy."

"And you want to buy?" she smiled.

"You'd know that," he smiled back. "Of course I do."

On the day of this talk they had crossed the broad sea-water inlet that leads to Earlhampton docks called the Estuary, and had bicycled to a tiny headland over the water. As he spoke Alban turned and stared over the sea pressing in short, brilliant waves up the Estuary. A big freighter was booming its way to the docks, with bright yachts ahead of it scurrying out of the fairway like frightened chickens. Two grimy tugs were fussing about the steamer, their foul, black smoke smearing the quick green of the trees on the further shore, trailing the white pile of an old ruined abbey and even the blue sky with filthy smudges.

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Watching this smoke-soiled landscape he said dreamily:

"It appeals to me. There's something simple, clean, and natural about that sort of life. It seems to me the only sort of existence where one can give oneself a chance. I mean by that—myself. I'm not being superior about modern life and progress, you know. I know most people love it and can't exist without its bustle, its zest, its strenuousness, its electric, all-conquering spirit. They're right, of course, for themselves. But I'm not quite their sort. I'm what Dunstan, who's all machinery and the marvels of the age, calls a damned reactionary."

He paused watching a bowline uncoiling like a snake across a patch of sky between the freighter and one of the tugs.

"Maybe I'm a damned reactionary," he went on. "But I'm not going to sneer at others because they don't feel as I feel. All I say is that for me the world is so strenuous that it gives me no time to think anything or do anything."

He rolled onto his elbow and smiled into the beautiful oval face of the girl.

"Doesn't it ever seem queer to you that all the modern advantages, all the labour and time-saving things—telephones, trains, motor-cars, 'busses, trams, wireless, the whole speeding-up of everything—results not in giving man more leisure but in robbing him of it? With all his Twentieth Century advantages man is infinitely less reposed and at ease than a man of several hundred years ago who

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possessed none of these marvellous contrivances to save him time and wear and tear."

"That sounds rather like an echo of my father," said Gilda.

"Oh, one's fathers aren't always wrong, even in this age," grinned Alban.

"A Daniel come to judgment," she mocked gently.

"Besides," he went on, "I'm not against my advantages. I should hate to have to do all my reading in the bad print of our forefathers or by the aid of a tallow dip. I like electricity. I like good sanitation, and good roads, and motor cars. I like all modern contrivances. What I don't like is their tendency to crowd and command me to the exclusion of other things. They ought to help me live more spaciously and serenely. That's what they were invented for. Instead they make living more rapid, packed, and complex. Man is a slave to his advantages now. That's why I'd like to live on Moap's Farm with certain modern conveniences and all the old attractions."

"Such as beauty, serenity, good books, and time to enjoy them; good music and time to enjoy it; thought, contemplation, dreaming . . ." said Gilda, softly.

"And decent living, no grasping or grabbing or manoeuvring to get the better of others, or fighting to get on top of someone else. No particular social or economic competition to make one hate one's neighbour even more than one hates oneself."

"It's a lovely dream," said Gilda, softly, more

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than half in that dream herself. "But maybe it's only that. The rivalries of Arcadia can be just as bitter as those of cities."

"A Miss Daniel come to judgment," he smiled. "I should say you were right, but I fancy one could hide from them more easily in the country. And then, if I could get hold of Moap's place, I would only use it as a sort of harbour of refuge."

He explained to her that he couldn't, and wouldn't leave Earlhampton for good. He couldn't leave his work at the Factory, partly because he couldn't afford to, and partly because he was too interested. Kent Drugs was in his blood naturally. What he aimed to do was to make Moap's Farm a sideline of the Factory as well as a place of retreat. They could draw direct from it for such drugs as were "official" in the Pharmacopoeia, and at the same time use it for experimental work among the old herbs that had dropped out of fashion.

In fact the Farm couldn't be handled in any other way, it wasn't a real livelihood for any man, and with the drastic changes Alban would make, changes that would eat up money, they couldn't expect to run it at anything but a loss for three, four, or even five years. Even when it began to pay there wouldn't be luxuries in it, just living for a man and a little over.

"But I'd count my holidays there part of my profit," smiled Alban, "though Oswald can't see that as an asset. Also I'd like to take the place because with me in command old Moap wouldn't be driven

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out of his Paradise. He could still potter round any day he liked and kiss his fingers at his beloved Wild Marjoram, Sweet Clary, Shepherd's Purse, Lady's Smock, and Selfheal."

"What gorgeous names they have, Alban."

"Yes, they lure you with their music. That's one of Edwin's jokes by the way. He said, in that quick way of his, 'I suppose you plant 'em all in a stave and play 'em . . . or sing 'em.' "

"What a queer boy Edwin is," laughed Gilda, her face suddenly quick and soft. "He has a mind like quicksilver at times."

"Hasn't he?" Alban cried. "It's really genius. He startles with his verbal flash. And it's more astonishing because it comes from some extraordinary natural supply within. He doesn't read. . . . ."

"Why should he?" said Gilda, quickly. "Some people read too much, are fuddled with reading."

## v

Alban was faintly surprised at the tone in which Gilda had championed Edwin. But it conveyed no warning to him either of her interest in Edwin or of the condition of his own heart.

He knew then that she was seeing a great deal of Edwin, and that when Edwin was not travelling, ostensibly for Kent Drugs, it was practically impossible to have Gilda to himself. Even that did not mean much to him. He did not realise that he was in love with Gilda himself. It is a curious fact that

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many Anglo-Saxon males at least can enjoy and in fact seek out the companionship of a girl and continue that companionship for years on an almost intimate basis without realising they are in love.

Perhaps Alban was a little too much in awe of Gilda to admit he was in love with her, and Gilda would have been as startled at a proposal as Alban would have been at finding himself making it. Gilda was not even dimly in love with him then. Indeed his great charm to her was that there was none of the annoyance of love about their friendship.

Alban to her was a relief from the thin, vitiated air of her home. She liked him for his healthy dreaminess, his queerness, his spontaneity, his directness, and for what her father called "his Galahad spirit." She liked him for his tall, thin, quick movements—not one of them reticent or considered. She liked his narrow, lean face with his unrestrained emotions lighting and darkening it, and the blue eyes dreaming or shining in it.

It was, she knew, not really a handsome face, too long, too irregular, and the bony structure too apparent for good looks. But it was a clean, strong face, a jolly face, a pleasant, sincere, and sympathetic face. It was a face at once ingenuous and of curious spiritual wisdom, austere and yet whimsical, resolute and yet curiously tender. The face of a boy impulsive, idealistic, healthy, and fine-minded, but dogged and obstinate, too, and inclined to find in opposition a reason not for surrender but for fighting.

She said once: "You've got a wild flare in your

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eyes sometimes, Alban. A fanatic fire. There are times when you look as though you were ready to go to the stake and even enjoy the fire for the sake of your ideals."

"Ideals do blot out things," agreed Alban. "I suppose that's how those old martyr people felt. Only I'm not martyr stuff, my ideals are only tin-pot little fads."

"Like trying to be straight, to be clean, to be fair —tin-pot things like that," smiled Gilda.

## *Chapter IV*

### i

GILDA'S engagement to Edwin was a shock to Alban because, as has been said, it was so unexpected. But it was not a shock that awakened Alban. It took Aunt Heppie's penetrating venom to do that. Even then it was less realisation of his love than the knowledge that Edwin was not acting fairly towards Gilda that moved him most acutely.

They had been engaged months only, and yet already Edwin was back at his old beastliness, and had actually left Gilda to face Aunt Heppie alone while he went off to Brackenhurst to visit his old fancy, the flash, opulent widow, Mrs. Hogarth, who had a pretty income from her late husband's tied-houses to adorn her violent and brass-haired personality. Alban was thoroughly disturbed because the old Edwin had not really changed his spots, and Edwin himself, in his bold and sly way, was inclined to make things worse.

Edwin had developed a subtle change with growth. His character, his manner, his outlook had coarsened. His lively wit had become more and more tinged with malice, and that malice more and more aimed at Alban. He had heard of Aunt Heppie's home-thrust, because he never failed to hear of things. He

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had become one of your hearty, legs-spread-apart fellows forever leeringly in the know.

Ethelfleda undoubtedly carried the news to him. That insistent champion of Edwin, that pulpy female knight-errant of the racketty one, with her loose grey flesh that was so inclined to puff everywhere—calves, hips, breasts—like an unhealthy fungus, whispered into ears utterly unconcerned at her errantry the story of Aunt Heppie's exposure of Alban. She told because with all the affection of her blood she detested her brother Alban, and because she hated Gilda.

She hated her future sister-in-law with a sweeping loathing. She hated her for liking Alban, for seeing the real talent in Rosamund's paintings, but above all because she had the effrontry to become engaged to Edwin. There is no doubt about it, there are many women who hate those other women who mate with their brothers and sons. It is something more than resentment at an alien intrusion. It is the hatred of the robbed for the robber, for the siren who can allure what they cannot hold. Mrs. Kent had this feeling faintly. She did not quite see how Gilda had a right to be so beautiful when her father was a mere schoolmaster. She felt that Gilda had "superior ways." She was perhaps secretly a little terrified of what might happen when one so fastidious discovered the real coarseness of her son's nature. Already in advance she was up in arms against this girl's coming disgust at her son.

Ethelfleda's feelings were not faint. They were powerful and genuine. And in her oblique, feminine

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way she told Edwin of the Aunt Heppie incident because she knew she was striking at Gilda as much as Alban.

She was not mistaken. Edwin made the most of the matter. With gusto he began to play the part of the man in the way of lovers when they meet. He enjoyed that form of humour now. Perhaps he had reached a stage when, the zest of conquering this exquisite and aloof woman having waned, he needed something fresh to stimulate his interest in her. To see her blush, to see the bewilderment and pain come to her eyes, to watch her puzzled, pitiable attempts to play up to the joke was a peculiar source of satisfaction to him. It almost made him give up his visits to Brackenhurst.

He developed a whole repertoire of fancies. He would say, "Oh, awfully sorry, I didn't see it was Alban with you," and pretend to withdraw tactfully if he came upon them together.

At table he would say, if she wanted him to support some statement, "No, are you sure you spoke to me about that? You're not confusing me with Alban, are you?"

He was a master of that sort of thing, and played the game with a hundred variations. He would make it seem that the only sure way of getting Gilda to some party or outing was to promise her that Alban would be present. He would pretend that the only way to get her to do something was to beg Alban to ask her to do it.

A mean game, but one that seemed to give him

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peculiar joy. It was a new way of stirring up one he was already finding too tempered and fastidious in emotion for his more hearty taste.

And he stirred her up. He perplexed, pained, and even frightened her. Her sensitive mind telling her something was wrong, she was in terror of losing him. She was deeply in love, deeper than she would be later when she began to see him more clearly, and the threat of loss was agony to her.

He knew it. His experience of women had given him an intimate perception of her and the way to torture her. And Alban, watching him at it, wondered at the unloveliness of it and speculated what was behind it. Was Edwin tired of her already and trying to sicken her? Or was he just naturally cruel and cold-hearted as that wretched girl, Gertie Woodrun, had declared?

He couldn't himself remain calm under it. When Gilda looked at his brother with brow puzzled and eyes full of pain, and cried, "Why do you say things like that, Edwin? Is anything the matter? Have I done anything to upset you?" he had to snap out himself:

"Don't worry Gilda. That kind of vulgarity seems to Eddie the highest form of humour."

His pointed chin was thrust out and his eyes had points of cold fire in them. And his manner said: "I've let you understand you're a damn cad. Are you going to take that lying down, or are you going to give me a chance to smash your face?"

But Edwin merely grinned as he did at any home

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truth now. Since Alban had grown a head taller than himself, inches broader round the chest, and his muscles were iron-hard with clean living against his slack and indulged muscles, he recognised that the crude methods of school-days were no longer commendable. Besides, quite half of his fun was to have this hot-headed fool twisting violently on a pin. It had become more and more one of the instincts of his life to attack Alban and to enjoy every exhibition of vehement, cold fierceness in his brother—and fear it a little. But, to give Edwin his due, fear was not the least pleasurable of his own sensations. It was like playing with fire, and Edwin was steadily developing his passion for fire.

The two brothers stood facing each other for a minute. It seemed as though this time Alban's anger would reach a breaking-point, and he would strike Edwin. Mrs. Kent looking on anxiously thought so. She called from the fireside: "Oh, Alban, you might come and tell me the figures relating to Moap's Farm. I've been talking to Oswald . . . there are one or two points I wish you'd make clearer."

ii

Mrs. Kent was finding it necessary to be diplomatic in her home, and more than diplomatic. As she said after this "appalling exhibition" to Oswald:

"Something will have to be done, and soon. One day things will overstep the mark, and I shudder to

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think what will happen. Brothers at fisticuffs over a woman! Think what people would say."

Oswald, who was having too many cabinet meetings lately, growled: "Edwin is a confounded and disgusting young fool. I'm getting sick to death of him."

"He's not tactful," said Mrs. Kent, judicially. "No, he's not at all tactful."

"That doesn't begin to describe him," snarled Oswald. "Why can't he behave himself? He's engaged to a nice girl, and yet he can't run straight even now. . . ."

There was that silence for a space in which a man is expected to feel that he has blundered. Then:

"I was meaning," said Mrs. Kent, primly, "that Edwin is not acting too wisely in front of Alban, and I fear that Alban may do something scandalous if it goes on much longer."

"It's Edwin's fault," snapped Oswald, taking his blunder out on Edwin. "He is behaving like a damn fool and a cad to pretend the things he does about Gilda and Alban."

"It's wrong, I know," said Mrs. Kent, picking bird-pecks at her dress. "But, then, you see, he *does* see that Alban is in love with Gilda."

"Good God," from Oswald, staring like an astonished bull, "that's rubbish."

Mrs. Kent said: "Oh, it's true. He *is* in love with her. Aunt Heppie saw it at once. It's obvious to most people. . . . The way he looks at her . . ."

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Oswald stared open-mouthed. "Good God," he exploded, "I simply don't believe it."

Mrs. Kent's manner became abruptly, stiffly tragic: "It is always the way. A girl, an utter stranger, comes into a home and the house is at once divided."

Oswald, still fighting to recover reason after the shock, ignored tragedy: "Look here, do you mean that she—she—"

"Oh—oh, I am saying nothing against dear Gilda. Nothing!" There was noble protest in the denial, but for once Oswald went straight to the sub-intention beneath.

"But look here, that's what you *are* implying. You're hinting that there is something between them."

"No—never! I know my own sons too well to suspect them of—of . . ." She remembered that she knew Edwin rather better. "I mean, I'm implying nothing definite. I feel that as far as she is able Gilda is genuinely in love with Edwin. Yes, I am certain of it."

"That's what I think, and I'm certain she's not at all the sort of girl . . ."

Mrs. Kent said swiftly, snatching him back from the vague, rosy fields of male idealism: "Of course it is difficult for some girls to resist admiration. It is only natural, I suppose, for a pretty girl to feel that she can influence men."

"You're hinting that you think she is leading him on a bit?" said Oswald.

"Oh, no . . . or if she is, it is quite innocent,"

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said Mrs. Kent, with the air of one actually defending Gilda against a grave charge ruthlessly pressed by Oswald. "I don't think she realises she is doing it. She means nothing, but I suppose Edwin can't help seeing . . . ."

"Edwin," snapped Oswald, as though the very name touched off a powder charge, "I'm coming to the limits of my patience with Edwin."

"But, Oswald, if he sees . . . innocent though she may be . . . he's bound to feel annoyed."

"That's no excuse for a fellow behaving like a brute. He ought to know by now, when he's got a straight, sweet, charming girl . . . ."

Mrs. Kent said nothing, but her compressed lips said much. Oswald went on:

"If he doesn't like her intimacy with Alban, he ought to be man enough to tell her straight out. Though, knowing Alban and her, I can't see how he's got a thing to complain of. If he's tired of the girl . . . I say, Mother, has that occurred to you? Do you think all this arises from the feeling that he has made a mistake?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't think so. Of course, the glamour does wear off when you get to know someone—really."

"Well, if that's how he feels, it'd be more honourable of him to break off the engagement. Best thing for her—I sometimes think."

"That depends on *her* point of view, doesn't it?" said Mrs. Kent, a trifle too sweetly.

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"You mean she's very much in love," said Oswald, which was not at all what Mrs. Kent meant.

"I mean, I don't think she'll give him up readily," murmured Mrs. Kent, wondering why men were so dense. But Oswald was no longer thinking of that. He was thinking of Edwin and the messes Edwin had had to be got out of—by him.

"It seems to me," he said, putting his thoughts into words, "that he's tiring of her—now he's got her. And that and other things—" he looked furtively at his mother and then at the carpet again—"makes me think that it would be a good thing to send him away. It could be managed. I can pack him off on a long tour to see Continental buyers. That might give an excuse for a—a sort of break, and keep him out of the way while things are straightening out."

"I'm afraid that will make no difference—with Gilda," said his mother, sadly.

"You feel she's too fond of him to give him up?"

Again Mrs. Kent felt nothing of the sort. She resolved to speak plainly to a nature incapable of reacting to hints.

"I feel that," she said gently. "And then—it's a thing I don't like saying, that I wouldn't even hint to an outsider—but, after all, Edwin *is* a partner in Kent Drugs, and an underpaid schoolmaster's daughter fully appreciates what *that* means."

That penetrated at last. Oswald changed his stare at the carpet to a scowl at the hearth-rug. There was immediately no doubt in his mind that his mother, with her wondrous feminine intuition and directness,

had put her finger on a major point. To the woolly mind of Oswald, Kent Drugs was a concern obviously tremendous. He felt that everyone in Earlhampton regarded it with the awe and wonder he himself felt for it. And that being so, it seemed to him, as it seemed to the older generation of Kents, that few girls, however charming, independent, and high-minded, could resist the chance of being linked with the Kents, mated with Kent Drugs and Kent affluence.

Truly his mother had made the final, the irrefutable statement. And though he said, "Oh, I don't know. I don't think Gilda Conroy is the sort of girl to be influenced like that," he felt that it was merely his masculine chivalry arguing against an indestructible verity.

And his mother immediately made taut and snugged down her point, "Ah, that's your chivalry speaking," which was flattering, and reconfirmed his opinion of his mother's immense acumen. "I'm not saying anything against the girl. I think she loves Edwin genuinely, but one must recognise the plain fact that she's not altogether foolish or blind about the advantages of marrying a partner in Kent Drugs. No sensible girl would be."

"And I do think she's fond of Edwin," said Oswald, feebly capitulating.

"Of course, I shouldn't dream of thinking otherwise," said his mother, recognising he had capitulated, and allowing him all his quaint male ideal. "I'm only pointing out that there is no hope of ending this dreadful situation by sending *Edwin* away."

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“Well, but what else can we do?”  
“Alban must go to his Farm.”

iii

Mrs. Kent's careful generalship had brought her to that. She had pinned her son into a corner where he must admit that the only way out was to give Alban the Farm that Oswald despised and feared.

Oswald was ready to fight against the Farm both as a man who feared novelty, and that it would lead his wild brother even further astray, and as a business man who detested what he considered a bad commercial proposition. He did advance all these points, but at a disadvantage. Mrs. Kent had him beaten. She had already proved to him that the only way to ease the situation was to get Alban out of the way. The only way to get Alban away was to buy him the Farm and maroon him on that Farm.

And she had done this for a reason far beyond even Oswald's woolly conception of the situation.

Oswald admitted that the Farm had uses, that they did buy drug-herbs from it, and that they could buy more. He admitted that in time, after Alban had re-planned and developed it, it might be run at a small profit. But he saw no reason at all of linking that crazy Farm with solid Kent Drugs, of letting the fantastic concern be a drag on Kent Drugs.

It was then that Mrs. Kent advanced the second factor of her plan. She said quietly: “It won't be

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that—necessarily. It will be a separate business—of Alban's."

Oswald did not see where that was leading. He said stubbornly: "I'm afraid it won't. It'll be a sort of side-line of the Firm's. That's how Alban sees it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Kent, "but *we* do not necessarily regard it in that light."

Oswald sat up, breathing quickly. He couldn't quite believe his mother's line. He knew very well that Alban regarded the Farm merely as a side-line; that he would not approach the purchase in any other way. And yet, from her very tone he saw that his mother was determined to make it something totally different. Into his dazed and rather scared brain there flashed the clauses of his father's will. If a child set up in another business outside Kent Drugs he was to be allowed to do so—but he would cease to have any interest or rights in Kent Drugs in future. Oswald knew that his mother was planning to attack Alban through that clause. He moistened his lips, and said thickly: "But if Alban thought . . . ?"

His mother was not going to allow the sentimental male to voice his thoughts. As one who was determined to do the right thing despite the anguish of her mother's heart, she said: "I don't want Alban to think I'm not acting in his own interests—if I can help it, Oswald. I know that he regards the Farm as a side-issue. I am willing that he should go on thinking so—that it should be so. But we've got to look ahead. For one thing, Alban himself might decide that he likes herb-farming better than the

factory work. Well, there he'll be with his separate business, as the will provides, already bought for him. Again, there might be difficulties over the partnership." Oswald gulped a little. "In that case I, both of us, would feel so grateful that we had seized this chance he has so begged and implored for, and that he actually has this separate business behind him if—if we had to refuse him any part in Kent Drugs."

That was her way of putting it, but Oswald understood the true meaning behind it. The classic parallel did not occur to him, but his emotions were Macbeth's when he realised what Lady Macbeth had let him in for. He almost feared his mother, but he admired her enormously, too.

For very plainly and finally she had planned to wipe out Alban if he ever proved too dangerous and troublesome. Buying this farm for him would do that. Alban would think it no more than a little speculation on the part of Kent Drugs. It would be nothing of the sort. It would rank as a separate business bought for Alban. Under the will the law would hold that all his interests in Kent Drugs ceased at its purchase.

Oswald was morally winded. And yet elated. He had always disliked the idea of Alban being a partner, had always dreaded the time when that vigorous, radical, speculative, and rather wild mind would assume a status equal to his own. That would inevitably mean a clash of wills, and he feared for the supremacy of his own. And to be honest, his fears

were for the firm and the family since he was stolidly sure that only his level brain could safeguard the family interests, whereas Alban's idealism would wreck them.

Nevertheless he felt that he was being mean and underhand—sly. That was because, being slow, he could only yet see the truth of such a deed, without any moral excuses to befog it. His mother saw all of his mind. She went on steadily:

"You mustn't think I'm acting in any way but as a mother should, Oswald. I don't wish to—to be unkind to Alban. Nothing need be said to him. I mean the Farm can go on *seeming* to be but a sideline of the business. If, as I hope and pray, Alban turns out to be everything we desire, if he settles down . . . well, nothing would please us better than to take him into partnership without saying anything. You feel as I do, I know, Oswald?"

"Oh . . . oh, yes . . . Good business man, Alban. If he weren't so viewy . . . ?"

"That's it—viewy," said Mrs. Kent, as though gathering strength from the wisdom of her eldest. "It is his viewiness that fills us with anxiety. And—and I've got to think not merely of Alban, but of *all* my children. I've got to protect them, too. And if his viewiness endangers them, you see what I mean, don't you, Oswald . . . ?"

Oswald saw at once that he had been given quite the strongest moral weapons for fighting the instinct that he was a cheat. He said with warm gratitude:

"*Of course* you've got to think of the rest, all of

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us, Mother. I know you can't do a thing like this without much heart-burning, but—well, the well-being of the majority counts most. The greatest good for the greater number. It's not fair to let one ruin the future of all."

"You think I'm right, Oswald?"

"Utterly right, Mother," said Oswald, hardly able to suppress his elation at the feeling that now his supremacy in Kent Drugs would never be challenged, and only quenching it with a distinctly moral frown. "You always think for the best, dear."

"And you think we could manage to buy Moap's Farm without—?"

"Without Alban suspecting that we . . ." began Oswald, and was pulled up by his mother's frown.

"Without hurting dear Alban's feelings, I mean," she said pointedly. "I don't want him ever to feel that I am acting against him, because really I'm not—if he acts sensibly."

"Oh, it can be managed easily," said Oswald. "The lawyers are very tactful. I'll see them on my way to the office. And as for Alban, there won't be any trouble. He'll sign anything we suggest—to get that Farm."

That was Oswald's way of saying that Alban trusted them too much to suspect anything underhand.

"Well, I'll leave it all to you," said Mrs. Kent. "How soon could he go down to the Farm to take it over?"

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"At once," said Oswald. "There's really nothing here that we need him for."

And that was true. A tangle which had led Oswald to call Alban back from the Farm, which had cost Oswald months of agonising and temporising, had been settled out of hand by Alban in a handful of days. He had done his work so well that it could go forward now without any worry. The whole situation was favourable for the tactful banishment of Alban. Alban, beginning to worry again about Edwin in his relationship to Gilda, suddenly had that worry wiped out by the new wonder. Meeting Gilda coming out of a new and glittering draper's that looked like a false jewel in the old setting of Above-the-Ward, he showed her a face from which anxieties had been banished. They stopped and talked, and suddenly, "Have you anything special to do at this vital moment?" he laughed.

She said "No" with a faint blush, for she had arranged to give that afternoon entirely to Edwin, and, not for the first time, he had sent a little note putting her off. But Alban in his present mood did not note the blush.

"Well, then," he said, "come with me to the old Witan Ring. I have special rites to perform." He smiled in his odd exultance and she warmed to that smile.

"Rites. What rites?"

"Shiss," he laughed back. "Just to mention them here might give their peculiar magic a nasty twist.

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Talk quickly about humdrum subjects, so that the Local Influence will not guess."

They talked quickly, gaily, trailing pennons of laughing exchanges as they walked, dodging round sober-minded people on side-walks that were medieval but crowded. They climbed steadily through the town. They crossed the old Moatlands, where pilgrims from the Continent used to camp and recover from seasickness before marching piously to the great shrine of St. Rood. They went up through the sleek, meek-faced little square, to which old lindens and new flowers and the aura of one famous hymn writer and two superior, second-rate historians imparted a Georgian charm; along Scutage Street, where, to the right, steep stone steps shot down to the silted flat that had once been part of the famous Earlhampton Estuary. On the left of Scutage Street there lived, even then, a poor creature who might have been the origin of Dickens's Miss Havisham, for little boys, climbing thrillingly up iron railings, could look into the parlour at a wedding-breakfast uneaten and mouldering to dust, and, with luck, might catch a glimpse of a lank, faded woman clad in wedding garments that knew no wedding, prowling like a ghost about the table.

They went up through the thinning residential district that melted to The Open, a common that was at one time part of the great royal preserves covering all this district. To the left then, to where a small, regular clump of trees stood out of the gorse-clad

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heath on the very lip of the hill that overhung the city.

They sat there and looked over the tight-packed houses, silent for so long that Gilda felt she had to say at last: "May one, even in a whisper, mention it? The Rite—what is it?"

"You can shout it," Alban laughed back. "It is a rite of triumph—over all that."

His arm indicated the city and docks of Earlehampton with a gesture. Gilda looked down at them, and thought them picturesque and romantic enough to be loved and not triumphed over.

Before them lay packed the older part of the city. At first it was a jumble of crazy roofs and fantastic chimneys, with a soft blur of smoke toning it down, and the old spires rising out of that blur, and one or two new factory stacks, and beyond roofs and spires and stacks the lift of ships' masts and funnels, looming strangely large and out of drawing, and their reds, buffs, and blacks sharp against the quick shining of the harbour water behind them.

At first that was all one saw, a crowded, little provincial port with walls and chimneys all twisty and awry like the goblin town of a fairy-tale drawing. As one looked detail and history emerged. There was the Norman-on-Saxon tower and spire of St. Cuthman's, where the French had broken in twice and massacred the whole congregation at prayer. That tapering pencil was Holy Blood, where Philip of Spain had heard Mass on his way to meet his bride, Queen Mary. One could just see the line of the

Norman wall, and the tip of the Salt Gate, near the water edge, through which armoured troops had passed to Crecy. The Ward was plain to them, the solid, squat land-gate still carrying the spikes on which the heads of pirates, idealists, traitors, martyrs, and other treasonable fellows had been stuck. The old beamed house with the false roof in which the third Earl Hampton had hidden against the wrath of a king could not be seen, but one knew exactly where it was.

History and colour were in that town and could be enjoyed as one analysed. It was a symphony in quaint roofs and mellow red-brick, with lindens splashing it in fairy touches of green.

"Why crow over it?" smiled Gilda. "I think it rather charming."

"It is rather charming," he agreed. "I withdraw triumph over *it*. The triumph is over its modern spirit. It is the triumph of the escaping victim. I'm escaping, Gilda."

"Alban," she cried. "Alban!"

Her tone startled him. She was looking at him with parted lips, her eyes wide, an air of consternation on her face. He refused to believe she had gone pale—but she looked pale.

He turned doggedly and stared over the town. What he thought he had seen he refused to believe—he must not believe. He said in a consciously gay voice.

"Isn't it great? I'm escaping, going away."

She said after a distinct pause, "To Margarettin?"

"Moap's Farm has been bought," he said, and he waited anxiously.

Then: "But, Alban, that's wonderful. You must be beside yourself with joy."

He turned swiftly. Yes, he had been utterly wrong to—to imagine anything. The clear, genuine gladness in her voice, the glowing pleasure in her face and eyes was merely the sympathy of a good friend. He'd been a conceited ass to think the news had saddened her.

"It's settled," he said. "I've persuaded them at last. Even dear old go-slow-and-go-far Oswald. I knew they must in time see that the Farm was a good, practical proposition as well—as—well—as a fad of mine. It's going to be immense fun . . ."

He went off at top speed telling her all the fun it would be, what he meant to do to the Farm to give it a commercial backbone without robbing it of its essential charm.

"You fill me with envy," she said with a certain wistfulness. "What luck to be able to do all this in a place like that."

"I'll write you all the shocking and attractive details. Letters long and probably boring."

"Not boring," she smiled. "I shall look for those letters. Only letters aren't quite the same."

"But you must come down and see it all. It's not impossibly far for a day trip. Get Edwin to bring you."

"Yes," she said in a flat tone, "we might do that."

"And what about your holidays?"

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"A long time away," she smiled.

"Only months. Why, I shan't have the place really shipshape before you come. But are you going there this year?"

"Thereabouts. I amouth."

"Five miles away, you'll be able to come to lunch and tea every day that you feel bored with yourself. You can just sit on the veranda and browse on the sea and the cap. And if you need greater spiritual activity, I'll reserve old Moap and his dog Moreover for your more arid occasions."

"I'm certain there wouldn't be any."

"I don't believe there would," he laughed. "I don't see any coming in the next few months. There's so much to do, and when I'm not doing it, there's so much to see. I haven't begun to explore the district yet. There's an old house by the river, for instance, where, faith being strong and patience long, one can on appropriate nights hear 'Egyptian'—which I rather fancy means Phoenician—seamen call the lead as their ships oar up the Estuary. I've local word for that, and it is up to me to prove it."

## iv

In the delightful talk of all that was going to happen at Moap's Farm it became plain to Gilda that Alban was not leaving Earlhampton for good.

"Oh, no," he told her in answer to a question. "This is only a side-issue, you know—an attractive one, but, as I told you before, my real work is at the

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Factory. I'm keen on that, and it is what Kents must do, too, unless they have special vocations which lead them to branch out in separate callings, like Rosamund's art, or Dunstan's engineering."

"You don't regard this as a separate business?"

"Heavens, no. Don't even whisper it. It would imperil my future at the Factory. I wouldn't touch it if I thought it would be regarded in any light but as a feeder to Kent Drugs. You see, that would cut me off from my partnership, and apart from the fact that the Farm isn't a Big Money proposition, I couldn't bear to risk losing my interest in the Factory."

"But—but aren't you a partner in Kent Drugs already?" asked Gilda, surprised. "You talk of it as though it were to come in the future. I thought it was yours already."

Her palpable surprise would have taken Mrs. Kent aback, since she had hinted that it was Edwin's partnership that kept Gilda bound to him against whatever charms Alban, the non-partner, exerted. Alban's face clouded. He did not often think of the partnership. He left that to time and the fairness of his mother and brother, so certain was he that it must come to him in the natural course of events. There were, however, moments when the delay chilled his optimism. It was not a very great cloud, however, for though he was aware of something of the reason for the delay, he could not conceive his mother and brother capable of doing anything but the

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right, the just, the inevitable thing in the end. For this reason he made excuses for them.

He told Gilda that he wasn't a partner yet—officially, but that was because he had not yet become a whole-time member of the staff. His chemistry course and his preoccupation with the Farm had kept him away from the office to a certain extent, and nothing really could be done until he had reorganised the herb farm and had taken up a definite position at the Factory.

But he did make Gilda definitely aware that he expected a partnership one day, and that he had no intention of letting even this matter of the Farm interfere with that ambition.

### v

Presently she changed the subject: "I shall miss you a great deal, Alban. That was why I was so startled when you sprang your news."

Alban was silent. He had felt all along that she wanted to explain the dismay he tried to convince himself he had not seen in her face. And he felt there was a deeper reason than he pretended behind it.

"I was rather stupid to blurt it out like that, Gilda," he said. "I was thinking entirely of myself."

"And perhaps I was thinking entirely of myself, too," she said. "We've been such good friends, Alban."

"We *are*, Gilda," he corrected.

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"Yes, we are," she smiled. "You're such a splendid chum. I've always been able to talk straight to you. And—and if I do it now, you won't . . . won't . . ."

"What is it, Gilda?"

"It's quite the hardest thing to be simple about," she said, looking at him with anxiety. "I do want you to feel that it's because I'm anxious, really anxious, that I speak of it at all."

Alban stared at the view beneath them, the goblin vista of a goblin town now misted in the faint, smoky-pink light of evening.

"All right," he said quietly. "I think I understand—is it about Edwin?"

"Oh, Alban," she cried with her heart in her voice, "have I—do you think I have offended Edwin?"

"Not you . . . I don't think you could . . . But why do you think it?"

"It's a feeling rather than anything definite. Somehow, he seems—different. It may be me, I don't know. But I do feel that his attitude is a little strange."

"You mean his jokes, his teasing?" asked Alban, with a blush, for he was part of that teasing.

"That is part of it."

"I don't think that means anything," said Alban, slowly. "Edwin likes to—to josh people. Always has. If he finds people are easily drawn, as I always can be, it amuses him to tease them."

"Yes, I tell myself that," she said, feeling for

words. "But sometimes it seems more than that. It seems as if his attitude towards me had altered."

"In what way exactly?"

"He seems off-hand. He doesn't seem to be so thoughtful. He seems brusque." She wrung her hands, staring out over the town with eyes of pain. "It's hard to say it. I feel so underhand. And I wouldn't speak to anyone, only—only I do want help. You see, it seems to me that at moments he is quite a different man to the one I—I knew, and I don't know how to—to meet him. It seems as though I have to—to reorganise myself, to adapt myself to a new man."

Alban was chilled and at loss. He told himself with a feeling of sickness: "She doesn't know a thing about him outside the attitude he adopts towards her. When he drops that attitude and shows the real man she's at sea. She can't realise what he is, or what his past is, or the essentials of a nature that made that past. She's simply and utterly innocent."

He was appalled. For the first time the real horror of this clean, fastidious, innocent creature linking herself blindly to a man who was emphatically none of these things, who was in fact the horrible opposite, came home to him. It was the blindness of her act that disturbed him. "It isn't fair," he told himself. "It's monstrous. She ought to know the truth so that she could judge for herself whether such a marriage was worth risking. She ought to know."

She mistook his silence.

"I know it's beastly of me, Alban," she cried. "Or

rather it seems beastly—it isn't really. It's because I don't want to hurt and annoy Edwin, even unconsciously, as I feel I do now, that I want to know all about him. A girl must understand a man completely if she is to be a good wife to him. I want to be worthy of Edwin."

Worthy of Edwin! He stared, almost stupefied. Yes, she meant it, she was serious—the tragedy of it! This little saint wanted to be worthy of Edwin—the thing would have been droll if it had not been so hideously tragic. How could one deal with her appalling innocence?

Again she misconstrued his silence. She cried with cheeks very pink: "Don't think ill of me, Alban. I know talking like this is strange, but you are the only one I can talk to—and I do so want to prevent spoiling things with my blundering inexperience."

"*You won't do that,*" said Alban, trying to pull his wits together.

"Not in the main thing," she cried with a brave smile. "Nothing can alter the big thing that is between Edwin and me. That's rock-bottom and solid, but the little things in which foolish inexperience causes mistakes and misunderstandings, they're the sort of thing I want to guard against."

Alban had nothing to say. He could only tell himself that she was tremendously in love with Edwin. And Edwin . . .

He blurred out before he could guard his tongue: "*You're tremendously in love with him, Gilda?*"

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And she answered quite simply: "Yes, quite tremendously."

"And Edwin—?" He had to ask that, having asked the other. Much depended on her answer. He expected at least some hesitation, some doubt, about her answer. Her certitude was final.

"Edwin is the same," she said with the simplicity of complete conviction. "More than me, I think . . . I think, even, I'm cold beside him. If—if he didn't love me, I think it would explain things. So it must be my stupidity, the little things. Is—tell me frankly, Alban—is Edwin touchy?"

"Touchy!" gasped Alban, for that was the last thing Edwin was.

"I mean—does he take offence easily?"

"I should say absolutely not."

"I think so, too. But perhaps even you and I don't really know."

"Have you a definite reason for asking?"

"This sort of thing"—she said slowly—"and do believe I'm not being petulant, only trying to get things straight . . . We agreed to spend last Sunday in the Forest, picnicking. We fixed that when we saw each other on Friday, but on Saturday I got a note—it hurt a little—bluntly putting me off. That has happened rather frequently lately, and it's worrying me. It's the thing that makes me wonder if I have offended him in some way."

"Can you think of anything?"

"No, that's the worry of it."

"No quarrel?"

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"We've never quarrelled, Alban."

"No—no difference of opinion?"

She thought and suddenly the colour, vivid and burning, spread over her neck and face. But she looked steadily enough at Alban, and said evenly: "No, no difference of opinion that would explain. We had a tiny passage of arms—not an unfriendly one. It was about what—what he called my frigidity. But—but it couldn't have been that. I saw him on Monday, and he was the same as ever, not huffy even."

"What did he say about Sunday?" began Alban, and suddenly his eyes widened. "Why, last Sunday, he . . ." He stopped abruptly and said again. "What had he to say about Sunday?"

He had reason to be startled. Edwin had been away from home all last Sunday, and the reason he gave for it was that he had spent the day in the Forest—with Gilda! He wondered what had been behind Edwin's lie, and was rather afraid to guess.

He heard Gilda saying: "He said he had remembered an engagement he couldn't possibly give up. He was very sorry."

"Did he say what it was?"

"Yes, he had to see a man named Lang at Rood."

Alban was more perplexed. There was a customer of Kent Drugs named Lang at Rood, and he was a particular friend of Edwin's. If Lang had fixed up an engagement with him, then he might think it important enough to put Gilda off. And yet if Edwin

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had lied about a day spent with Gilda, he might be lying about his engagement with Lang.

Alban did not like it. It looked fishy. It looked as if Edwin was up to his old games. And Gilda was ignorant of those habits of his. Appallingly innocent. She ought to be told, or at least given a hint.

He said as guardedly as he could: "Edwin is not an easy proposition. He's not quite the same as other men. . . ."

It was difficult to go delicately, to phrase the thing innoffensively, so as not to shock or affront her.

He was surprised and relieved to hear her murmur: "I know. He's not a bit like other men. His individuality, his character is so markedly different."

He wondered if Gilda was getting him right. There was a note of enthusiasm, of glamour in her tone that did not square with Edwin's markedly different character. He must make it plainer.

"I mean, he's knocked around a great deal," he said, "seen a good many aspects of life that we—you are not likely to see."

He stopped. Gilda was nodding at him in smiling confirmation, was saying: "I know—I know, that's why I feel so ingenuous, so provincial. I sometimes think it's because I'm so rustic—mentally, you know—that it is hard for him to be patient always."

Alban could only stare at her. He felt helpless. It was impossible to give her a hint of the true character of the man she loved. That splendid innocence of hers made her impervious. That

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splendid, generous, all-giving, all-worshipping love simply twisted anything he had to say into praise of Edwin. It wasn't because she was stupid, it was because she was blind with love.

Impossible to tell her or even to warn her by hints. Nothing but plain, downright, ugly facts about Edwin would touch her—and perhaps not even those. And plain facts—Alban was without plain facts. It wouldn't be fair to drag in Edwin's past—that was over and finished with, he believed. These rumours of the Brackenhurst widow, the Mrs. Hogarth Aunt Heppie had spoken of, then? No, one could not defame a man on a rumour.

He felt miserable. He felt like a man on the brink of something ugly, and that things, after all, weren't right between Gilda and Edwin. He felt that he had failed in his duty towards her somehow.

## vi

Rosamund said to him over the top of her drawing-board: "You've been with Gilda? You've spent the whole of the afternoon with her?" The sharp dark eyes in the young pointed face flashed incredulity.

"Why not?" asked Alban, surprised by her vehemence.

"Oh," snapped his younger sister, her eyes narrowed and examining him closely, "was she miserable?"

"Does it follow?" he smiled.

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"Was she?"

"She was a little hipped—at first."

Rosamund's dark eyes went black, shining with anger.

"The beast," she snapped, "the beast!"

"Who?" demanded the astonished Alban.

"You know well enough. Edwin!"

He frowned, but recalling Gilda's dejection about Edwin, said: "I'm not understanding this, quite, Rosamund."

"You've been away . . . else you'd have noted that it was becoming a sort of habit of his." Her keen eyes saw he didn't understand yet. "Gilda was hippy because she was to meet Edwin this afternoon, and he's put her off—again."

"How do you know?"

"She put me off because of Edwin."

"But why should he put her off—again?"

"Search me," said Rosamund, scornfully.

"Brackenhurst as usual, I suppose."

"That means Mrs. Hogarth, I take it?"

"You've taken it."

"And—what does Mrs. Hogarth mean, Rosamund?"

"I don't know," she said calmly. "I'm not supposed to know in any case. Too young. Also I don't try. Drawing and painting are enough occupation for me."

"But you know it is through this Mrs. Hogarth that Gilda is miserable."

"Sure. And I think Edwin a beast."

"But what *is* Mrs. Hogarth to Edwin?"

"That's an indelicate question to put to one of my years, Alban. I know nothing—don't care. I understand she is flashy, vulgar, and rich. I suppose she has the fleshly charm irresistible to the Edwins of this world."

"Rosamund!"

"There you are. Plain facts from my pretty youth shock you. You think me too young to know a spade to be a spade."

"It wasn't that. It was the mention of her when . . . Well, hang it, Edwin's supposed to be in love with Gilda."

"Is, Alban—*is*."

"But how can he be—while there's this Mrs. Hogarth on his mind?"

"My subject's art, not anthropology nor the psychology of the male. All I know is that Mrs. Hogarth or no Mrs. Hogarth Edwin is—as yet—in love with Gilda. As she is with him."

"It's infamous," said Alban, sitting down.

"Whatever's the word, there it is," said Rosamund, who, like Alban, was markedly non-Kent. "Call it the dual nature of man, the Mormon instinct in the male, Sacred and Profane love, or the difference between the wife and—well, the other thing. But there it is. Gilda seems to be the wife Edwin wants—at present. Mrs. Hogarth is, perhaps, the other thing."

"Why do you keep on saying things like—'at present'?"

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"Because endurance is not the habit of the Edwins."

"And what do you mean by that?"

Rosamund looked at him with cool, searching, acute and mischievous eyes.

"Oh, I don't know. One always expects lads like Edwin to grow cloyed after conquest—even though he's now got what he considers the promise of the loveliest and most distinguished wife in Earlhampton. The chase is the thing with his sort."

"You seem to know a great deal about men," said Alban, remembering he ought to be surprised at her.

"One doesn't have to know a great number of men to know all about man," she grinned, "And Edwin is a fairly simple, primitive animal, anyhow."

As Alban started upright in protest at what he thought her coarse cynicism, she said calmly: "Don't be wet, Alban. I live in the same world as you do, with the same number of eyes and ears for gathering knowledge. What's the good of pretending that I don't know what I know."

"All right," said Alban. He frowned. "Do you think he's linked in any serious way with this widow?"

"I don't know anything about the woman," said his kid sister, coolly. "I don't know whether she is a right-'un or a wrong-'un, or merely good company for a gloomy day. I recognise she's of the type Edwin has always found most amusing. But beyond that. . ." She suddenly measured Alban with her

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pencil. "That's a good pose, Alban. Can you hold it?"

"No, I can't" he snapped, and getting to his feet made for the door. At the door: "And I suppose Gilda knows nothing?"

"Absolutely not a thing," said Rosamund, already back at her drawing.

"Sure?"

"More than." Rosamund paused in her stroke. "How should she? Though Edwin feels like a public sore to us, he's really no more than a private skeleton. Surprise you how few people know the inner reality of Edwin."

"She ought to know," burst out Alban.

Rosamund looked up, measuring him. She knew what explosive, headlong stuff he was.

"Who? Gilda?"

"You know I mean Gilda. And you know she has a right to know."

Rosamund considered this. "Maybe you're right," she said.

"You see it plainly."

"Ye—es. Only—only I haven't that bulge developed so highly as you, old thing. Theoretically I see it—but me for a quiet life and drawing."

"I think she ought to be told before it is too late."

"I wonder," said Rosamund, leaning pointed chin on wrist. "Would it do any good? She's in love with him tremendously. She wouldn't believe, perhaps would refuse to believe, or if she did, she

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would still go on. And then later it'd start to work outward from the inside. After marriage, you understand. It might smash the marriage before it got its chance, because she was suspicious, distrustful, because she imagined horrible things into simple actions. It's dangerous to tell, I think, especially with Gilda in her present state."

## *Chapter V*

### i

O SWALD in his office was saying: "Look here, you'll have to stop it. It's getting beyond my patience, your mother's patience. Understand, you've got to pull yourself up."

Alban could not hear the words of the answer, but he knew it was Edwin's voice, the perky, slippery voice that could be so enraging. It had a note half-imperious, half-frightened. Impertinence was in the ascendancy, for Oswald barked out:

"You needn't lie to me. I know where you were yesterday, just as I know where you were Sunday. I won't have any more of it. You're mother won't. You're shirking your work. You're absolutely unreliable in business—as well as in other things. You aren't worth the money we pay you. No, you're not, not worth a quarter of the money we pay you. That's bad enough. The other thing is worse."

Again the perky, slippery voice, fear coming to the top now. Again Oswald, barking:

"None of that darn lying. I know where you were. I know."

The slippery voice had a squeak in it.

"Will you deny right out now that you were at Brackenhurst yesterday and on Sunday, when

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you said you were with Gilda? Be careful now—I know."

Pause.

"Well, do you deny it?"

Pause.

"Thought better of it, eh? Just as well. Do you deny that you visited this Mrs. Hogarth, and stayed with her the whole time both days?"

The slippery voice jerked a feeble sentence.

"Called on her!" Oswald's scorn was immense. "Called on her! You spent the whole of each day with her. Do you deny it?"

Pause.

"You don't, you can't. Well, then, I tell you finally—finally, you understand—that it's got to be put an end to. It's got to stop *now*. I won't have it. Your mother won't have it." The slippery voice said something. "Never mind if there's nothing in it, it's got to stop. You're engaged to a decent girl, a sweet girl, and your mother and I are not going to put up with any more of your tricks. It stops now or there'll be serious trouble for you, Edwin. No, I won't argue about it. I mean what I say. Serious trouble. . . ."

ii

Alban, finishing off his work in the outer office, waiting for the moment when he should go in and have his final talk with Oswald before setting out for Moap's Farm, listened with a cold sickness. He had spent a vile night, tossing sleepless and going

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over and over the whole bad business of Edwin's engagement.

Now he was urgently swayed towards insisting that Gilda be told all about his brother. Now, with equal urgency, came the doubt as to its wisdom. Rosamund's cool, speculative words came to him. To tell Gilda might lead to more harm than good.

Over and over again he had turned the matter over in his mind, and had risen exhausted and in a curious limp and negative mood in consequence. That mood had helped him to see Rosamund's line of argument better. He had, all through the morning, been strengthening the conclusion that it was best, safest, and fairest that Gilda should not know.

Starting out with the idea that he might settle his mind by having a straight talk with Oswald, he had, by the time he was ready to go into Oswald, come to the conclusion that there was no need to say anything.

But hearing Oswald talk to Edwin had changed all that in a flash. With every accusation of lying he heard, with every implication that this was not the first occasion that Edwin had been warned against visiting Mrs. Hogarth, he had seen that Edwin was unchanging; that no threats, no promises of amendment from Edwin, no love of a good woman would ever change his brother.

He was unalterable in his habits, and Gilda did not know.

Gilda ought to know. It was only justice that Gilda should be told.

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### iii

"Hallo, Alban," said Oswald, looking up through his bushy eyebrows. "Cleared everything up? Ready to go?"

Alban drew up a chair, sat down squarely and quietly. He meant to be quiet—and square, too—through all that was going to happen.

"I heard you talking to Edwin just now," he said. "I want to talk to you about Edwin."

Oswald stiffened, hands out on desk, eyes fixed on blotting pad. He did not say anything. Alban had hoped for an opening, to give him his cue for a calm, judicial statement. The silence made him feel clumsy, blurted.

He said, still fighting to be even, calm: "From what you said to Edwin, I gather he is behaving as he always behaved. That he doesn't change—ever. Won't—can't, perhaps. Well, what I want to say is, how does that affect Gilda?"

He paused. Oswald had no intention of helping him, but the pause was so long that he had to say:

"How does what affect Gilda, Alban?"

Alban wanted to blaze out—wanted to shout, "Why beat about the bush? Why pretend? But he said to himself, "You must keep cool about this, remain balanced."

He answered with reasonable evenness: "I mean the fact that Edwin is untrustworthy, and is engaged to a girl who imagines him trustworthy."

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"I really don't follow you," said Oswald. "What's it all about? Where do you come in?"

"Well, I'm his brother."

"So am I. But I don't see what meaning even that has."

Alban pressed his fingers hard on the desk, as though pushing down impatience.

"Let's have it squarely," he said. "I'm saying, I don't think it right for Gilda to go on with this engagement without knowing exactly what sort of man she is going to marry."

Oswald sat back with a jerk. He gaped with genuine astonishment.

"'Pon my honour, Alban, you are the most amazing chap I've ever come across."

"But why? Surely the matter is plain enough?" said Alban, finding it hard to keep calm. "I'm merely suggesting something just decently honourable."

The movement of Oswald's hands said, "Well, I'm in for it, I suppose." He said curtly: "Well, then, what exactly and plainly *are* you suggesting?"

"I am suggesting that Gilda be told what manner of man Edwin is—what his character is, what his habits are; what his past life has been."

Oswald began to get extraordinarily red, he began to goggle. He was looking at Alban as though he had been confronted with a new, unique, and startling kind of snake. He cried, "Good God!" then, with a hopeless gesture, "Are you mad—or what?"

Alban, startlingly pale, but with a curious shining

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under the pallor, which also got into his eyes—his “pig-headed” look, Oswald said—leaned forward. He said evenly:

“You know exactly what I mean. You know what Edwin is—as a man. He’s unstable, unreliable—and vicious.”

Oswald bumped forward in his swing-chair with such violence that he had to put his hand on the desk to save himself from falling onto it.

“Vicious!” he almost shouted. “Vicious!”

“You know he is,” said Alban. “You know his past—and what he’s doing now.”

“Vicious!” gasped Oswald again. “You want me to tell this girl, a stranger, that I consider my own brother—vicious?”

“Yes, you or Mother ought to tell her.”

“Mother!” said Oswald, as though stung. “Don’t be indecent.” He peered into Alban’s face, entirely at a loss to understand. “What *is* wrong with you? Are you really a bit touched, or are you lacking all shame and decency?”

Alban retorted in a hard voice, “Is a man mad or shameless because he points out your responsibility?”

“Responsibility! Don’t you realize that you are talking about my brother—your brother?”

“That,” said Alban, deliberately, “is the responsibility. Don’t you see it is because he *is* our brother that we have that responsibility? . . . No, let me say what I mean, Oswald. This is a matter, not of family ties, but of decency, of right. We, and apparently we alone, know what Edwin is. Unless we

tell this innocent girl, this clean and trusting girl, she will go blindly into a marriage with a man who is not trustworthy, who is not clean, and, from the way he goes on, shows that he never will be. Can't you see that in letting that girl go blindfolded into this we are not doing the straight thing? We are letting her marry with false ideas that may lead to tragedy, to ruin of her life."

"All I can see," said Oswald, with a snap, "is that you are asking me to betray my own brother."

"No, I'm asking that you should prevent his betraying an unsuspecting girl. We can't help ourselves about Edwin. Good Lord, don't you think I'm sick enough that it is my own brother I'm talking about? I hate it. The thought of what he has put upon us, as decent people, makes me ill—ill. I don't *want* to have to give ourselves away like this—don't you see that? It's only because we have no right to keep Gilda in the dark about such important matters, that we, as Edwin's brothers, must tell the truth."

Oswald was too upset to follow his reasoning. He could only gasp: "Vilify my own brother! Monstrous!"

Alban's lips opened, then shut in a tight, firm line, his hands grasped the desk hard. He said with unexpected quietness: "Look at it from another point of view then, Oswald. Say the girl in question was one of our sisters—Ethelfleda or Rosamund. What would we say to a family that allowed either of them to marry a brother or son whom they

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knew to be constitutionally unfaithful, whose life was unclean and unreliable? Should we like one of our sisters to be linked for life with a man of that type? What should we think of a family that wouldn't speak?"

"They wouldn't speak," cried Oswald. "You couldn't expect it of anybody. They wouldn't tell us."

Alban's fist thumped the desk.

"That's not the point," he cried irritably. "The point is that we should feel and *know* that they had betrayed our sister. You know we should think their action foul. We should think that they had ruined our sister's happiness, perhaps her life, and the lives of her children. We should be filled with anger and horror that a clean, innocent girl like one of our sisters should be linked to, polluted by an unclean man, a bad-living man, a beastly-minded man. You know what our rage would be, what our disgust would be. We'd hold the relatives who kept silent when they should have spoken responsible."

"You're talking rubbish. You're talking in a stupid and exaggerated way. Polluting, unclean, bad-living—and about your own brother! You've taken leave of your senses. You're—you're repulsive."

"Would you," said Alban, deliberately, absolutely ignoring his brother's indignation, "would you, would Mother allow Ethelfleda or Rosamund to marry young Evan Chapman?"

"Don't be disgusting," snapped Oswald. "You know what Chapman is. Everybody does. To

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mention him in the same breath as your brother—it's vile."

"Is it? We know about young Chapman because he figured in the Courts in one maternity case—one only! Is that record as bad as Edwin's?"

"Disgusting!" cried Oswald. "I've had enough of this. I won't stand . . ."

"Is it?" snapped Alban, his eyes suddenly blazing. "Don't run away from truth, man. Is his record as bad as Edwin's—yes or no?"

"But everybody knows about that young swine—" Oswald caught the contempt blazing in his brother's eyes. "We don't know what they hushed up. For all we know there were others . . ."

"That's what I'm getting at—the crime of hiding these facts. The one public matter is enough for us in Chapman's case. We know the man, and we'd rather see our sister dead than linked to such a man. Isn't that so? Again—would you, would Mother, dream of allowing our sisters to marry him?"

Oswald glowered across the desk. He was furiously, deeply angry with Alban. He could have slashed him across the face with his ruler, but he had no answer. He could not answer. He knew he would rather see his sisters dead than married to a dirty little beast like this Chapman fellow. But he felt, in some obscure way, that Edwin's case was entirely different. Why it should be, he did not know, but he felt it was.

"You don't answer," went on Alban. "You can't answer. You know yourself that the mere thought of one of our girls marrying young Chapman is

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unspeakable. And yet you can't see that that is the very reason why I feel that Gilda should learn the truth about Edwin."

Oswald sat glowering, his anger mounting to hate of his brother, his mind searching for some means to teach the young cub a lesson, to overthrow him, to turn the tables on him—to hurt him. He said nothing. After a moment Alban said: "The only difference is that everybody knows about Chapman, but only we know about Edwin. That makes our responsibility greater . . ."

Oswald suddenly saw his way.

"How do you know that Gilda doesn't know? A good many people do."

"I know she doesn't."

"*You* seem pretty certain," Oswald was suddenly cool, sardonic, triumphant. He saw his way to score—he saw his way to hurt and silence this damned, impudent young cub.

"I do know that," said Alban, unsuspecting. "I know she doesn't know."

"*You* seem to know a great deal about her, seem to be pretty intimate with her." Oswald's tone was a direct sneer. Alban suddenly realised the new direction of the talk. He reddened.

"What the devil do you mean?" he cried.

"Well, is this advocacy all that it seems? Or is there perhaps a motive of your own about this—this telling on Edwin, this anxiety to blacken Edwin in the girl's eyes?"

Alban was thunderstruck. He glared at his

brother. For a moment he couldn't believe that the words had the meaning he had read into them. Oswald could not be so vile. Then the sneer forced home the truth. He sprang up, and he flung his long body half across the table to get at Oswald. And Oswald jerked back. He did it in fear, and as he did so, he snatched at an ebony ruler. For the emotion he saw in Alban's blazing eyes was very close to murder.

Alban was beside himself. Oswald's accusation seemed to him hellish. Oswald was hinting what Aunt Heppie had said outright—that and worse. He was hinting that Alban was taking this stand, not on the grounds of decent conduct, but because he was in love with Gilda—worse, because being in love with Gilda he wanted to blacken Edwin's character in the hope of getting Gilda for himself. That's what he meant, the cad, the mean-hearted swine.

His face blazed fury and his long arm swung back. "You cad," he shouted, "you unspeakable cad."

"Sit down," roared Oswald, holding the ruler at the ready, "sit down, you fool, or I'll swipe you in the face with this."

But he didn't risk waiting. He got up, his chair falling with a clatter, and backed out of reach. Even then he stood, ruler ready, on guard against Alban.

Alban had not attempted to come round the desk at him. He stood leaning over it, his eyes like a tiger's, and anger and contempt shone in his face.

After the first blaze of rage he was almost sick with disgust that Oswald should even play with such an idea. And gradually, from the feeling that he had discovered unsuspected depths of beastliness in Oswald, he became overwhelmed with the hopelessness of arguing with a man who could use such weapons. He could never make Oswald see—never! Oswald would think it was all because he was in love with Gilda. And—and perhaps he wasn't wrong.

His emotions, slipping back like a swift tide, went right out of him. He felt limp, sick, tired of the whole thing. Like many vehement natures, he was a prey to acute reactions. The reaction of hopelessness swept over him now. Yes, he was in love with Gilda, no good pretending that he wasn't. He always had been, though he had not always known it. He *was* in love with her. Aunt Heppie had seen it. Oswald saw it. No doubt his mother and the rest of them saw it. He was in love with her. And he wanted to protect her because he loved her.

There was no harm in that, there was no harm in loving her. It was a clean thing—reverent, anyhow. No harm at all—yet, how difficult it made things. It handicapped him with Oswald and the rest. It even handicapped him with Gilda. He couldn't tell her about Edwin because he loved her. To do it would be indecent. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to do it. If he hadn't loved her he would have, because it was the thing to do. Loving her did not blind him to the duty of telling her. If he had hated her, he would have seen that

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she ought to be told. But loving her . . . He was in the wrong all round.

He sank back into his chair, staring blind and bereft at the desk. Oswald had spiked his guns. Oswald had made the whole thing impossible, intolerable, vile. He couldn't make Oswald see the right thing to do—and he could see the right thing and couldn't do it. He felt like a lost soul.

And Oswald knew he had thrust home, made a stroke that left his brother numb. He knew he had scored, and he experienced a joy he rarely obtained in clashes with this difficult brother of his. He was asserting his position as eldest brother, the patriarch of the family. The triumph gave him power. The exhilaration cleared the woolliness from his mind. He attacked with assurance.

"It's no good your jumping up and glaring like that. It's just silly. Calling me a cad . . . Why, you're just a fool. I was only pointing out that you were looking at this with a strong prejudice in favour of Gilda?"

"Was that all you meant?" said Alban, with contempt.

Having got on top of the discussion, Oswald was not going to lose his mastery for such a little matter as scrupulousness.

"It was," he said firmly. And he improved his position by a little hypocrisy. "I understand your attitude with regard to Gilda, and honour it—up to a point."

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"You can't regulate honour up to definite points," said Alban.

"Hadn't you better let me have my say instead of trying to split hairs?" said Oswald, with dignity and almost with genius, for Alban felt that he *had* been merely scoring a point. Oswald's rebuke was the kind to react on a nature like his at once. It called on his instinct to be fair.

Oswald saw that he had scored again, and that gave him power. He went on: "You are looking at this from one point of view, the girl's point of view. And I quite frankly admit that there is a great deal in what you say. But there is another point of view, Edwin's. You don't seem to have looked at that. Well, I have to. As—as the head of the family I have to look at all sides . . ."

"But Edwin . . ."

"No, let me have my say out. There's Edwin's side, our side. What about Edwin, what about Edwin's future? I know what you are going to say. He's been racketty—wild—bad-living, if you like, in the past. But is that any reason why we should smash his future? Edwin's marriage is, I think, your mother thinks, Edwin's chance. Marriage will steady him, as it does so many others."

"But that's—that's gambling with Gilda's happiness for the sake of Edwin," cried Alban. "How do you know he's going to settle down? His past's all against it."

"How is it so many other young men have settled down, become good, decent, fine husbands after

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marriage? No, do wait a minute . . . Look at the thing squarely, Alban. Don't rush at it in your impulsive way. Edwin isn't the first and only racketty young man the world has known. You and I are not blind fools. You know as well as I do that it's no uncommon thing for young fools to sow their wild oats. I don't hold with it—you don't—but there it is. No getting away from it. But do those young men make bad husbands? Look at them, men of our own time—Diver was a racketty one if you like, Munsard, Collins, Heriott . . . All of them pretty fast, you'll admit, and yet you know yourself they have settled down, become decent fellows. Marriage has steadied them up."

Yes, Alban had to admit that was all true. All these were straight fellows now, and they had been rips. All the same, as Oswald had felt that Edwin was different from Chapman, Alban felt that Edwin was different from these shining cases. And like Oswald he had no reason for his feeling.

And Oswald saw it: "It's a fact that gadabout young men do settle down into ordinary, decent fellows after marriage. It's human nature, it seems. But say someone had raked up their past, Munsard's for instance, what would have happened? You know without being told. Millie Bridges would have had nothing more to do with him, the engagement would have been broken off, Munsard would not have got his chance of pulling himself up and going straight, and he'd probably be a rip now and a worse rip. Do you see that?"

Alban saw it. It was logical, and yet—and yet . . .

Oswald, with a flash of genius rare in one so woolly, went straight on to the next point.

"You're thinking that Edwin is different, Alban. That's because you're looking at it too closely. He isn't. Why should he be? He's just a human being after all like the rest of 'em. He's no better and no worse. I daresay the parents and families of the others thought they were different, that there was no hope for them. Everybody feels that his sorrow and trials are the worst, are exceptional. But they're not. The Edwins of this world are very ordinary and everyday."

Alban even nodded at that. Ideas always swayed him. He saw the power of that one. It appealed to him. Convincing stuff. All the same, he said slowly:

"What about this Mrs. Hogarth then?"

Oswald said, almost with joy, "Nothing in that, take it from me."

"But," persisted Alban, "he is neglecting Gilda for her."

"To a certain extent, I know," said Oswald. "But emphatically there's nothing in it. You yourself heard me put it to him point-blank just now. There's nothing in it. I know a great deal about Mrs. Hogarth. She's a big, flash woman, with too much money and too much leisure. She's the bold type that amuses Edwin. But there's nothing more in it than that. Mrs. Hogarth, as I happen to know, is straight."

"I say nothing against her or any woman," said Alban, stiffly. "It's Edwin's attitude that makes me anxious. Why does he neglect Gilda for this woman?"

"Well, I've spoken to him about that, and that's going to be changed," said Oswald. "Of course I don't know any of the reasons. Edwin was intimate with Mrs. Hogarth before he became engaged to Gilda, went to see her much too frequently. Perhaps it isn't easy to break off without giving offence. But I don't know anything about it, save that I have spoken to him pretty firmly, and there won't be so much, if any of it, in the future."

Alban was silent. He had, he felt, nothing more to say. Oswald knew this was the time to round off his victory: "You see, Alban, others are watching Edwin as much as you. I am, your mother is. We're not blind to him. At the same time we do feel that Edwin's future must be safeguarded—as well as Gilda's. We don't want to spoil his chance of settling down. We've got to think of him, too, you see."

Alban apparently saw. He left for Margarettting without opening the subject again. Was he convinced? He didn't know. It seemed to him that he had been baffled, headed off, had had all his guns spiked. Oswald had been logical, and perhaps his own love for Gilda had made him illogical. Perhaps he had been carried away by sentiment. He didn't know. But he did feel uneasy. He did feel that everything was not all right, that Edwin was not right, and that it would be straighter, fairer to Gilda

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to let her know what manner of man Edwin actually was. But he did not know. He could only worry.

### iv

Mrs. Kent said almost before Oswald was through with his report of Alban's attitude, "But, Oswald, the boy is really *dangerous*."

"Sometimes I think he's not quite sane," admitted Oswald.

"Really dangerous," cried Mrs. Kent. "It's beyond mere waywardness and eccentricity. He really is a peril. I can't understand him. I can't *think* of it in a son of mine."

"I think he gets worse instead of better," said Oswald, sorrowfully, his eyes on the carpet, his will trying to prevent his thoughts dwelling on the partnership.

"Yes, he does," said Mrs. Kent. "To think that I should have to suffer like this from one of my own children . . . Are you sure he won't tell Gilda himself?"

"I think not. I got him to see the sensible point of view. Besides he's at Margaretting now for some months."

"He might write."

"No, I don't think he's likely to do that."

"Perhaps not. I'll drop a little hint to Gilda about the unwisdom of corresponding with the brother of her fiancé. But I don't know. She is a difficult girl. Very difficult. She has ideas too."

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"She is more Alban's sort. Why she ever hooked on to Edwin, I can't understand."

"Hooked," said Mrs. Kent, sweetly, "is perhaps the best word." She noted Oswald's bewildered stare. "She's quick-witted enough, my boy, to realise how chary we are about putting a boy of Alban's disposition into a position of—er—responsibility. She probably found out in the beginning that he wasn't a partner as Edwin is."

"Yes, he does make relying on him difficult," sighed Oswald, thinking how important, attractive, and sensible it was that he himself should be practically in sole command of Kent Drugs.

"And how about Edwin and this Mrs. Hogarth?"

"Edwin," said Oswald, angry at once, "is a confounded fool. And if he's not so pig-headed as Alban, he's as difficult, because he's utterly untrustworthy. I told him plainly what I—we thought about that affair. And I got him to promise he'd drop going to Brackenhurst. But all the time I had the feeling that he was simply lying. He lies in the most barefaced way and goes on doing just what he likes. You can't hold him or check him down."

"Threaten to stop his salary, threaten even to cut him out of the firm," said Mrs. Kent, majestically.

"That would throw him right into the arms of Mrs. Hogarth, I'm sure," said Oswald. "She's very well off, and his sort, too, and he has his way with her. I can threaten if you like, but I think it dangerous."

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"No—no," said Mrs. Kent, hurriedly. "You mustn't risk that. Whatever else she is, Gilda Conroy *looks* a person of breeding and distinction. I'd endure anything to prevent a marriage to that horrible, vulgar, peroxided publican woman."

## *Chapter VI*

### i

**B**Y July, Alban had done so much on Moap's Farm that it seemed to him to be crying out to be seen by someone of the family—and particularly by Gilda.

For months he had been working with the steady absorption that means complete happiness. The changes he had made in his cultivation grounds were not, perhaps, perceptible to the uninitiated eye, for though he had enlarged his plantings of commercial herbs, he had left much of the land as it was, meaning to develop his improvements slowly. He had, for instance, left practically untouched, for his own fancy's sake, and for the sake of showing Gilda when she came on her holiday, old Moap's patch of simples.

His main changes had been about the house.

He had rooted up old Moap's lightning-defying laurels from the front of the house, and, thanks to this and the removal of some lime trees at the fringe of his land, he had got his clear view of the ever changing sea with the sweep of cliffs lying along it like a lover's arm. He had built a light veranda, onto the front of the house, and sitting there he could see all the changes of light and colour on sea

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and on the cliffs and on the boldest and most austere cliff of them all, the Cap.

And beyond the Cap he could see Iamouth, where Gilda was to spend her holiday.

But would she spend her holiday there? He was vaguely aware that Edwin was making further trouble and that he might prevent her spending a holiday near Alban. Edwin seemed to have heard something about his attempt at intervention and become vindictive. Gilda's letters, getting fewer and thinner through the months, seemed to hint vaguely at this.

Still, if she came, Gilda would like that veranda. He had made it practically with his own hands after the work-day. He had knocked one of the old, stubby house windows into a doorway to open onto it. He had a South American hammock ready swinging, and a big, deep, well-cushioned seat snug in the corner best for views. On a wet day or a cold day there were glass screens to slide about one, and one could enjoy the view in defiance of pelting rain.

And the view in rain wasn't to be despised. The grey slatey tints that came over everything gave this world of his an air muted and superb. Over the general grey lay subtler tints of purple, blue, and smoke-grey, while the cliffs stood like hanging cities above the mist on the waters. The sea itself was a symphony in sullen blues with the livid white crests shining wanly above the surges, or, in tearing weather, yellow-blues heaving and leaping with

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gestures of wild, flying, frothy arms flashing up and trailing the smoke of spume as though loosing to the winds the wicked flowers of the storm.

In all weathers there were quick and moving views, and in all lights, from the lemon-yellow ecstasy of dawn to the magic, milky world of moon-light. And on dark nights, away beyond the Cap, Iamouth graced the night with its jewels of star-lights . . . Iamouth, that little speck of Italy climbing a steep valley from a blue bay that would presently harbour Gilda.

Before the veranda sloped grass, and then masses of flowers exquisite in scent and shape and colour, and aromatic shrubs, and what not else; and close banks of honey-sweet privet. Cunningly Alban had grouped them so that the wind up the valley would blow their gay and lively perfumes into his house, onto his veranda, and fill it with the very breath of loveliness.

And this was not altogether mere impractical beauty, either. Alban, with Bunsen burner, flask and Liebig's condenser, was getting at their volatile oils, was experimenting with the pure, deep, and exquisite perfumes he distilled, dissolving them in rectified spirit, testing them, blending them, perfecting them, searching for novel and delicate combinations —feeling always for some definitive and beautiful and new scent that might capture the market, in the fashion that many distinctive Lavender Waters had captured it.

He had performed miracles with the interior of the house. It was a house that had started as a large, modern, villa-ish cottage, and had been added to and added to. It had a number of rooms, but none of them big.

Alban had cut out a lath and plaster party-wall to the right of the hall and turned hall and sitting-room into a big lounge. The door he had cut into the veranda gave greater light than of old. A long narrow window knocked into the west wall gave an air of actual radiance to a chamber that had once been formal, cramped, and stuffy.

Alban bees-waxed and polished the good stout boarding of the floor, distempered the walls orange, hung black chintz curtains with a bold, bright bamboo pattern at doors and windows, covered a broad settee and a couple of deep armchairs with the same fabric, and these with a few Dryad cane chairs, a piano player, a gate table, and a stretch of low book-cases completed his furniture here. A few plain mats were on the floor, some vivid and sharp colour prints on the walls.

He had a room full of briskness and light, and full of scents and the sea, too, as the soft wind blew up the valley.

Simplicity, sharpness, and colour shone throughout the house. And there was also central heating. He put in one big furnace to serve his drying shed and heat his home. He was comfortable in winter as

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well as in summer. Certainly Gilda would like his house, like his books, like his selection of music. If she ever saw them!

As the time of her holiday, which was rather her father's holiday, drew near, he began to wonder whether she would really come to Iamouth.

He was getting practically no letters from her now. Even the letters he did receive were dismally short and barren. They seemed to be savourless, they seemed born of an effort. They seemed to be written by someone whose mind had grown so tired, blank, and stiff that it had nothing to say.

Alban could hear, "What is there to write about?" in every sentence. And that wasn't like Gilda, not the old Gilda.

Gilda had begun by sending a weekly letter. A vivid, sparkling, flashing letter, a stimulating letter—the letter of a quick mind vehemently interested in and delighted with life, and putting that interest and delight on paper with running laughter. Plenty to write about in the beginning—but not now.

Well, perhaps he knew the reason behind that. Rosamund had given him his clue. Rosamund, as flashing in her own way but completely wayward, after he had hinted in several letters that he would like to have news of Gilda, had said:

"If Gilda is not writing to you, the reason is probably Edwin. Edwin hasn't put his foot down. Edwin never puts his foot down. An abrupt gesture like that would spoil his fun. But I shouldn't be startled out of my bobbed hair (just bobbed—I like it for its

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charming lack of plaiting and hair pins, and I think I look devilish, too. But I do hate people saying ‘Exactly like Joan of Arc’) to learn that Edwin has been making so much capital out of your writing, and hers, that she has dropped it. Edwin, you know, would rather like to annoy you that way. And I’ll tell you plainly, old stick, that in the best, brotherly style, Edwin hates you. Shocking! We oughtn’t to say such things, of course. It’s unnatural of us. But is it? All the hard hates in the world have been inter-family hates. So we’ll be modern, clear-visioned, and not shocked.”

Alban was a little shocked, though he felt that Rosamund in her bold, modern way was right. He could feel, even in Gilda’s letters, that Edwin was “getting at him,” that Edwin’s quick wits were utilising Gilda to get at him. He seemed to sense new strains of meanness and vindictiveness appearing in Edwin’s character. He did not doubt Edwin’s right to dislike him after what had happened, but this underhand attack filled him with sickness and disgust. He was even glad Gilda was stopping her letters to him, and he decided to stop writing to her, loss though that meant, for it would save her from annoyance.

He strongly resented one part of Rosamund’s letter, because it showed that Rosamund, in her hard-edged way, was becoming irritated with Gilda. Rosamund protested that she did not understand what was coming to an ordinarily sensible human creature like Gilda:

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"She seems to me to be acting like a sheep. She seems absolutely under Edwin's thumb. She seems to be afraid even of offending him. It really makes me a little sick to see a beautiful, intelligent, responsible being in terror before the slightest whim of a lout like Edwin. I loathe human doormats, and Gilda is showing a doormat-streak. She seems ready to put up with anything—*anything* rather than make him angry. It's a ghastly change, a terrible change. I find I am in physical revolt at seeing a girl of her fibre intimidated into doing things she detests all from dread of losing him. That's what it amounts to—just plain fear of loss. The mere idea that she is losing hold of him reduces her to nerveless helplessness. And the brute knows it, and turns the thumbscrew . . . Again how wrong of me! Can't you hear Mamma saying, 'You're talking about your own *brother*, Rosamund. How could a daughter of mine be so unsisterly?' But am I really a daughter of hers? Sometimes I think I am merely a daughter of Father's—just as you are entirely a son of Father's. It must have been his gooseberry bush we sprouted from, not Mother's particular shrub. We're such aliens that I can't logically admit she had any hand in us . . . But this is the sort of thing No Young Woman Should Discuss lightly. And it's not about Gilda. And about Gilda—I'm flummuxed. All I can say is—if this is what Love does to an intelligent human woman, me for unmitigated and unceasing spinsterhood."

Alban was profoundly disturbed. It was obvious

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that Edwin had not changed or improved, that in fact he seemed to be on a downgrade of brutality. Obvious, too, that things were not at all well between him and Gilda. His old fears revived, his old pain increased. He felt that someone ought to interfere, that Gilda ought to be told about the real Edwin, the danger of Edwin.

A further letter from Rosamund made the puzzle more difficult. It was an answer to anxious questions on his side:

" . . . All I can say is that they are engaged definitely and apparently unfracturably, and that they progress by regularised steps to marriage at the altar," Rosamund wrote. "I don't pretend a brain like mine can grasp it. But there it is. Edwin is—well, Edwin. I think he has made his visits to Brackenhurst a regular habit, but he keeps them deadly dark. Oswald foams at him, swears that he is doing less and less work, that he is not worth his keep, and so on—but Edwin actually seems to enjoy Oswald's spinning his wool in fury. That's Edwin. Gilda is—just miserable, with flashes of sheer happiness when Edwin is kind. No, I don't understand this condition of mind at all. Gilda is not really happy, and yet she dreads the idea of losing the fellow . . . She clings tight. That's the queer dread of loss, which I spoke of before and can't fathom a bit. And Edwin clings too, harder than Gilda. It's really amazing. You'd think with the bold comradey widow in view he'd be quite willing to cut his lucky. Not he. Mad not to, but he won't

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do it. The other day when Edwin had been too Edwin, Gilda did reach a point when she asked him point-blank whether it would not be better to break off the engagement. She held out the chance with both hands—mind you, it was cutting her to the heart, but she did it. Do you think Edwin jumped at the opportunity? He did not, sir. He refused even to think of it—refused with such ardour that Gilda was happy for a week. (Maybe, I oughtn't to be so ingenuous and spout all this. It's a personal confidence. Gilda told me about it when I suggested she should cut the brute out of her life—she was crying. But I know you're anxious about this, and being a child of Father's I understand why.) Now, do you grasp all that? Both damned uncomfortable, yet both refusing to give each other up. Why? Gilda one can *almost* understand. She's still sort of physically in love with him, it's only that, I swear, now. But Edwin has me baffled. You'd think, for the sake of Mrs. Hogarth and his own comparative enjoyment of life, he'd be only too willing to break away. Why does he cling to Gilda? All his instincts tend towards Mrs. Hogarth. Is it that he can't give up Gilda's beauty? Is he, too, still physically in love with her, though all the rest has gone? . . . No, I don't know the answer. All I know is that the Logic of the thing suggests that he should give Gilda up and go straight to the bouncing charms—plus income—of Mrs. Hogarth. And he doesn't. He still sticks to Gilda's side, though frankly they have so little in common that he is bored

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with her—as she has been with him—mentally—for months."

Rosamund, in her direct, unblushing way, started a train of thought that filled Alban's brain for days and nights. He couldn't understand. He could not see Edwin's reason. The fellow ought to give Gilda up rather than bind her. He was obviously, it seemed to Alban, no longer in love with her. Why didn't he give her up? Was it that he still loved her as men love women they desire as "official" wives? Was it desire? Was it spite? What was it?

Alban was baffled, and he was miserable. It seemed too hopeless a tangle for anyone ever to straighten out. When Gilda wrote to say that perhaps they would not come to Iamouth after all, he decided that he had better let the thing slide out of his mind. Edwin was manifestly so dominant that nothing could alter the situation.

Later, however, it appeared that either Gilda had asserted herself, or Mr. Conroy had taken matters into his own hands. A letter came to say that after all the Conroys would be at Iamouth for their holiday.

The turmoil started again in Alban's mind, and he lived for the day when he would see Gilda, and perhaps get some insight into the situation from her.

## *Chapter VII*

### i

ALBAN went along the road to Iamouth, the hanging road that clung to the lip of the cliff, that marched under a terrace of straight pines behind the Cap, that slipped through a tangle of woods, the trees wraithlike and eerie with a web of grey, ghostly, lichenous creeper on the sea side.

He passed lonely and isolated houses that looked puritan enough to the eye, though they were full of the smuggler holes and caves of long ago. He went through the little town of Colycombe, which contained, as every other little town on the South Coast contained, the authentic house in which Charles II slept that one night before he escaped to the Continent. He passed the great house where Kirke's Lambs had carefully and efficiently massacred a handful of Monmouth's adherents, and he came out onto the road that went swinging in a lyric drop to Iamouth.

He saw Gilda the best part of a half a mile away. She was sitting on the cliff staring out to sea at the place where she had promised to wait for him. She sat staring out to sea all the time, not turning, not seeing him, even when he crossed the grass to reach her. She looked up with a start like a woman com-

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ing out of a dream—not too pleasant a dream. And though she smiled at him, the smile was, he thought, strained and artificial.

Strained and artificial their opening moments, too. They exchanged tepid commonplaces of greetings and news like two people with appointments to fulfill meeting in the street. Alban found he had to talk and talk to keep clear of embarrassment; while Gilda did nothing but stare at him, as though she were perplexed at discoveries she was making.

She was as beautiful as ever, more beautiful. She was pale, she seemed frailer, and she was listless. She was without animation of mind or body. She sat there with a curious, perceptible inertness. As he talked to her, his words seemed to flow by her and not touch her at all. He talked about Earlhampton and received spiritless answers. He talked about the Farm. He said: "I don't really want to tell you anything about the Farm. I want you to come up and see it and enjoy it unalloyed. When can you come up . . . ?"

Suddenly she said firmly: "It was the right thing —your coming here, Alban."

Taken aback, he answered: "I think it was. I've enjoyed it all."

"I can see it," she said. "I keep telling myself you've changed. But you haven't. You've simply developed. You look more serene, more sure of yourself. You look firmer, cleaner. You've got a —a sort of air"—she looked about her at the sweet,

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fine countryside, enfolding it with a gesture—"like all this."

"Oh, I've been living up to my background," he smiled. "One must be worthy of one's scenery."

She laughed; she was suddenly animated into the old Gilda.

"How nice that sounds," she cried. "Like the old us. It carries me back years. I believe I've been missing that sort of talk."

"Well, I haven't had too much of it," he smiled.

"No? But then the views have kept you up to the mark. I wonder whether that is it—that you haven't really developed and that I've got Earlhampton in my eyes—in my bones."

"I don't think I am actually the changing sort," said Alban.

"No, it's me," she said musing. "I feel it's me. I've slipped back. Earlhampton and its mists, smoke, and enervation have saturated me, overweighted me, and I've slipped back." Again she looked at the scenery, at the breathing, flashing sea. "Well, this ought to be a cure. I thought it would be. I feel it is already . . . You know, I determined at last, in spite of—of . . ."—her hands caught together and gripped—"of everything, that I would come here. I would sit here solidly and let sanity have its way with me—have an uninterrupted think over things and get life straight. I know I was right."

Alban had the uneasy feeling of overhearing an intimate argument. Although Edwin wasn't here, Gilda was obviously arguing against Edwin. He said,

just to say something, "Well, the country is less likely to interrupt."

"Interrupt!" she cried. "It's the only place to think in. At other places it is absurd. Doing takes the place of thinking. Do you know, we nearly went to Weybourne for these holidays?"

"Good Lord! You would have hated it."

"I know. I knew I should have loathed it," she said. "My instinct was against it, but—" she suddenly stared squarely at him—"Edwin wanted to go there."

"Oh," he said feebly, "well, of course, Edwin likes places like that. Plenty to amuse him there."

"Edwin," she said slowly, as though she had been thinking Edwin out for the first time, "Edwin didn't like me coming here. He didn't like me coming here because he must have his own way." Her face darkened. "Was Edwin spoiled as a child, Alban?"

"I don't know," said Alban, uneasily. "I don't remember having noticed particularly—though of course he does like to have his own way."

"More than that," she said, and again she was dejected and limp. "He *must* have his own way. If he doesn't have it, then—then one can't hold him."

Again Alban was conscious that he was listening to something he was not supposed to hear. He could not answer.

"And yet I *know* I oughtn't to give in to him," she whispered, and she was acutely miserable. Looking at her, Alban remembered Rosamund's letter. Here indeed was a girl, sweet-souled, generous, en-

tirely swayed by affection, who was simply terrified at losing Edwin by holding out against his demands.

He said sharply: "It's not good for anyone to give way unreasonably. It's not fair to you, or for the matter of that, to Edwin. It means trouble in the future. In certain things one must make a stand."

"A stand," she said in a whisper, and she looked at Alban almost in terror. "I know I ought. I know it. Oh, but you don't know what it means . . . I'm afraid. Afraid!"

"Of Edwin?" cried Alban, in scorn.

"Of Edwin—myself—oh, everything. When it comes to the actual point, I'm afraid."

"Look here, Gilda," said Alban, in such a harsh voice, that she came out of her misery, her dejected day-dream, and looked at him. "You know this is all wrong . . ."

She interrupted him: "I oughtn't to have talked to you about this. It belongs to me alone. It's not—not nice of me."

"I don't know. I think—"

"No, Alban. I oughtn't to have talked like that. Not to anybody. Not to you . . . Edwin would not like it. We won't talk any more of it."

"But, Gilda, I want to—"

"No, Alban it's not right. We won't do it. It's a thing I've got to think out myself. I'll do it down here. That's what I came down for. I've got a clear week before Edwin comes."

"So," said Alban, dully, "Edwin's coming down?"

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"On Friday week, for a week, perhaps two. Now tell me about your Farm, and say how soon we can come and see it. I'm dying to see it."

They kept rigorously to the Farm. Her dejection left her as she talked, she seemed more cheerful, settled, happy. The absence of Edwin from the conversation somehow made her brighter.

He walked with her to their lodgings and renewed his acquaintance with Mr. Conroy, who, in view of his release, if only for months, from the hated mechanical round of exact science and his stay with nature, was already deep in Theocritus, Mantuanus, Sannazaro, Tasso and the rest of the pastoral writers.

At the lift of the road, where she left him on his return journey, Gilda said, smiling:

"It's been nice, this new meeting, Alban. It seems rather eerily new. It seems as though I'd had a wonderful afternoon with someone who is a delightful combination of an old friend and a complete stranger. You're nothing of the latter of course. And yet . . . well, there's something new about you to me. It's as though I hadn't ever really seen you before. I don't know whether it's me, or you, or the country, but only here and now do I seem to see you as you."

He was puzzled, looked at her anxiously. She laughed.

"Oh, don't be afraid. It's not unflattering—in fact, anything but that. You're somehow—" she blushed a little. "Oh, well, it's hard to express it. Only—only

I'm glad I have seen the you of you at last . . .  
Au revoir, until we come to the Farm."

She and her father came to the Farm two days later.

Mr. Conroy, a small, frail gossamer of a man, strangely white, thoroughly detached and given to dry enthusiasms, was inclined to be whimsical, was inclined to act as though he came trembling through the magic gate of some Merlin's garden, some old and sinister witch's Wyrtzwed (Herb-yard). He wanted to see all the herbs that were sure cures of "elf-disease" and sovereign relief for the "elf-shot" and "flying venom." He was ready to spout whole passages from all the old Herbals, from the *Leech Book of Bald* to Nicholas Culpeper.

"I like all that sort of thing, so imaginative and unspecific," he smiled. "After exact science the fine fantasy of unstable man is such a relief. There is so much music and colour in these old mad fancies—and, on the whole, quite as much truth."

"You'll have to wait for Ahab Moap then, and his dog Moreover," laughed Alban. "He'll give you all the fantasy you want, and perhaps a little more."

"Is he coming, Alban?" cried Gilda. "I am so glad."

"I thought he had to," smiled Alban. "He's so much the natural spirit of all this. He'll be along presently."

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"Meanwhile there's the house—and the view," said Gilda, who already in two days looked brighter, more reliant, more vividly herself. It was as though, removed from the domination of Edwin, her nature had been able to revive and strengthen. In such a way would a flower revive if muffling shade was cut away and it could get the uninterrupted sun.

Emphatically it seemed that away from Edwin Gilda was more able to be herself. She did not speak of Edwin. She did not seem to be clogged by the fear of offending Edwin, she did not seem terrorised by the thought of losing him. "It's only when he's present, when she can see him that she's afraid of losing him. It's—physical—a sort of physical domination," Alban reflected, seeing her, remembering Rosamund's letter. "I suppose that is one way of love. But is it real? I suppose so, I don't know. But it's dangerous, it makes her a sort of prey to the fellow."

Meanwhile Mr. Conroy was sitting in the cushioned corner of the veranda, gently and subtly steeping himself in the atmosphere of the place, and Gilda was standing greedily drinking in the view, the quiet wind pressing her soft, light clothes against her young, swift, and budding figure. From the sweep of the thigh to the little breasts; from the lift of the strong, white column of the throat so firmly and deliciously rooted in soft, flowing shoulders, to the small poised head in its casque of gilt hair, she was enrapturing. With lips parted, eyes bright, the finger-print of a smile at the corners of the small

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and eloquent mouth, she was a living goddess of sheer beauty and joy.

Alban looked only at her, she looked only at the view.

The country and the sea beneath her eyes were quick with light. It was that clear, shining light that seemed to make the whole world luminous. Sea and land, the bushes, the trees shone in flat, clean, bold colours, dramatic and massy. There was a moving and simple beauty in the bright grouping, and the clear light—blue and white—of the sky. The breeze flowing through it gave it the shining depth of crystal.

“Alban,” cried Gilda, “you are the luckiest man on earth. It’s pure rapture. I could stay here and look and look forever.”

That certainly jumped with Alban’s wishes; he could ask nothing more than that she should stay here, herself not the least exquisite note in that sympathy of beauty, for all time. It was a thing, of course, which he could not say.

Mr. Conroy from his cushions was saying: “Are these scents natural or have you stage-managed them? I believe you have. They pour up here like an army of joy on the march, intimidating one to sloth. You’ve hand-trained them, Alban.”

“Of course,” laughed Gilda. “That’s his cleverness. He knew they’d fit in. I never experienced such a mingling—view and colour and scent and beauty.”

“The ancients were right,” Mr. Conroy mused on,

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quite ignoring his daughter. "They treated perfumes rationally. They knew that scents were as stimulating as any other tonic: they clear the head, they ease the brain, dispel the vapours, clarify the intelligence. We lost *that* gift when woman robbed us of perfumes and by her natural instinct for excess cloyed our noses. Thus a gift of the gods was made effeminate and foppish."

Torn away from the view, Gilda nevertheless enjoyed the house. Alban had been right. It was the sort of house that Gilda would like.

"It feels fresh and live-in-able, and, somehow, Alban, you haven't made it as manny as I imagined."

Alban tried not to redden. It was she who had made it less manny, his idea of what she would do if she had had the furnishing. She liked his big, airy living-room, she would have liked to stay by his bookcases, talking of their contents. She seemed to be coming back to books with the hunger of one who had been starved. She would have liked to sit at his piano and play. She would have liked to brood over his pictures. It was decidedly her house. She had the instinct to linger enjoying it.

They went through the sheds: the potting sheds where "young herbs were schooled," as Mr. Conroy put it; the working sheds where the herbs were picked, flower and leaf and stem separately, by hand, and roots were washed, cut, and sliced; the drying sheds, one where sun-heat dried the herbs; another where, by a system of fires and big shallow racks upon which flower-heads or leaves were spread thinly and

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delicately, slow heat drew the moisture out of the herbs leaving colour and properties intact.

Alban showed them his small clean laboratory where he tested the strength and varieties of the drugs, and where he experimented in distilling the volatile scent oils of flowers and aromatic shrubs. And from there he went out into his plats of "weeds," and to his wider fields running up the Bottom to his big acres of commercial herbs beyond.

They were coming back from the wide fields when they encountered old Moap and his dog Moreover.

### iii

Ahab Moap was a tall, spare old man, who gazed with pointed, grey eyes through you to some ineffable revelation beyond. He was always dreamy and always alert. Very square in the shoulder and fine in the limbs, he held himself upright. With a bournous over his slack clothes, he might have posed for a beardless Moses. His bony face was refined and aesthetic, his lips a little tight. He looked dour and was full of dry humour. He looked a yeoman, and was packed with a strange bookish culture. One expected a burr from him when he spoke and got none.

A reticent old man, not always to be drawn. Conroy and his yearning for botanical witchcraft failed to touch him. He listened and said, "Maybe!" He hadn't read the old books Mr. Conroy spoke of, but he had heard old wives tell such tales.

"Such as?" demanded the eager Mr. Conroy.

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"Such as you tell, sir," he answered drily.

The dog Moreover—son of a thousand breeds—yawned, grinning hugely, as though he recognised and appreciated his master's point.

Old Conroy could not move old Moap to marvels. But Gilda without effort obtained reactions. He put into her hand a blue star of Borage, and said, "It rids one of all sorrows and melancholies."

Alban looked quickly at them, old Moap was so shrewd and penetrating. Had he been too penetrating? But his old, mellow smile, a revelation of his gentleness, took away any sting his remarks might have had.

"Viper-grass will do the same. There it is. I see Mr. Kent has left it there, but he doesn't believe in it. An old man's fancy, but not commercial, eh?"

"We'll see," smiled Alban.

"Sweet Marjoram," said old Moap, "checks sighing. Do ladies sigh now? I think they'd find more use for other things. In the old days they used to distil Pimpernel water for the complexion—it is supposed to soften it. I know women who use Lemons still. Solomon's Seal is considered good, too, and it heals bruises. And Lupin seed." He smiled in his quizzing way at Gilda. "Lupin seed was the real forerunner of the wonderful omnipotence of quack medicines. Burn them and you clear your house of gnats and small insects, mash them into a paste and not only do they make the user look more amiable, but could, at a pinch, totally eradicate small-pocks

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marks. The old 'green man' had nothing to learn from our advertisement columns."

"Who was the old green man?" from Gilda.

"He went round collecting weeds, herbs," said old Moap. "And he sold them. Sometimes he did some rough distilling for green oils. You've seen public houses called 'The Green Man.' They are shrines to his memory."

"I'm going bald," said Conroy. "Can you give me a herb to arrest that?"

"Yarrow or the ashes of Southernwood in oil were the old remedies for that, sir," smiled old Moap. His eyes twinkled. "And Peony seeds in wine cured one of nightmare; and Betony gives courage."

"I love the name Betony," said Gilda. "There were beautiful names among the old herbs."

"Beautiful still, and yet some are forgotten. I like the old name for Periwinkle. It was Joy-of-the ground! A rich name, one couldn't dream of a better. Periwinkle was considered good for cramp. Old men tied it round their legs; and it was also a charm against envy and terror and demoniac possession. Then there is Alleluia, the old name for Wood-Sorrel, and Maythe for Camomile. Goat's-beard is still called Go-to-bed-at-noon, a Cudweed is called Live-for-ever and Marigold was called Jackanapes-on-Horseback, but I like Marigold better. Then there's Yellow Touch-Me-Not, and Herb Robert, and Prunella was called Carpenter's Herb, or Sickelwort, because its corolla looks like a bill-hook, and it was supposed to cure wounds made with edged

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tools. Devil's Milk, another name for Petty Spurge, isn't to my fancy. But I like Devil's-bit for the Wild Scabious. The story goes that the Devil bit the root because he was so angry at its doing so much good to mankind."

"I like that," said Gilda. "I like a story like that clinging to a plant."

"You'll like the legend about the Rose of Jericho better," he smiled. "Do you know it? It's that the Rose of Jericho opened the night our Lord was born, and that if placed in a house it will always open when a child is born."

"That's really lovely," said Gilda.

Old Moap went on. "There's the story of Lady's Bedstraw, too. At first it had a white flower, but it was used as our Lord's bed in the manger, and when God's body touched it, it turned to gold in joy—as you can see for yourself to this day."

"Meadowsweet," said old Moap, pointing, "Queen Elizabeth's favourite carpet. She always had her chambers strewn with it, they say. Meadowsweet, Water-mint, and Vervain were the old herbs they flung down on the floor in the Middle-Ages, when carpets weren't used. They were supposed to add to the gaiety of the evening, too, their scents had a 'merry' effect."

All the way back to the house he was talking of the old simples he loved, telling of their well-known or forgotten properties. With a queer twinkle he could let them have some outrageous story of their qualities; how Hound's Tongue keeps dogs from

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barking, or how a double-walnut carried as a charm cures headaches, how certain nutshells applied to children's heads make grey eyes black, how a cucumber in a sick child's bed rids it of fevers, how oil of nettles rubbed on the limbs keeps out the cold.

He was full of the old lore, fantastic and practical. "We're laughed at of course," he smiled. "But sometimes they come back to us. They have suddenly discovered Comfrey again. It was an old wives' remedy that fell out of favour and became no more than cattle fodder. Then, quite suddenly, a doctor found there was something in it, and it has come to its own again."

"Oh, I think we've neglected herbs too much," cried Alban. "After all why are they less useful than minerals and synthetics? They're more natural, anyway."

"More than that," said old Moap. "I hold that when God found sickness coming to the world through the frailty of fallen man, He saw to it that the cure would grow to hand. Grow, as is natural, not have to be dug like your minerals. And how do the animals find their cures? The cures are there, I say. And you'll find them with less hunting than if you manufactured them in the chemist's shop. And there's a cure for everything. They tell me that the mongoose knows to what plant to go when he's bitten by a serpent. A friend of mine says that in South America there's a fruit with an acid so violent that it can cauterise any snake bite. And there's water-vine from which a man can drink when he's lost in

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the jungle, out of reach of pure water. Nature provides, and the more I see of Nature, the more certain I am of it. Go back to Nature and her herbs and man will be all right."

"He's a dear," said Gilda when he had gone, when she and her father were preparing to go. "And the chief wonder about him is his gentleness. But I believe that's part of all this. Here the fret and worry and anxiety and beastliness of life drop right away from you."

"Not quite," said Alban. "Some of the cottagers round here lead furious and embittered existences. They have abominable feuds and quarrels. Even the insects, Fabre says, are cruel and cannibalistic. The country isn't inevitably peaceful."

"Then what is it that does it?" she asked. "What makes him like that—what is it that's doing something of the same thing to you, Alban?"

"I think it is doing what one likes, as hard as one can. Giving the best in one, doing it perhaps a little for the sake of others. And doing that best in surroundings that suit one. Surroundings like this suit old Moap—and me. We can exert ourselves to the greatest capacity without fret."

"I'm glad you've come here," repeated Gilda. "So very glad, Alban. And I'm glad I've seen you here."

## *Chapter VIII*

### i

GILDA regained her old resilience and sense of adventure. She was abruptly, it seemed, changed from an anxious, listless, dispirited girl into a creature, sparkling, vivacious, avid of life.

Her interest was almost fierce. There was a greediness in the zest with which she swung back to her old preoccupations, her books and her music. Her passion for all manner of walks showed her almost hungry desire to tear all the beauty out of the district.

Alban laughed at her for her energy when she dragged him away from work to tramp swinging miles to see a small wood of curiously melancholy trees—which were not trees at all, but a company of too agnostic knights and ladies who had jeered at a witch, perhaps Morgan le Fay herself, and had been promptly bewitched into growing timber.

“Of course I’m over-hungry,” she laughed. “I’m doing exactly what these trees would do if they were suddenly changed back to their human shapes. They’d go out after life with both hands and with all their spirit to make up for all they had lost.”

“My dear girl, but you haven’t been a woody birch since the reign of King Arthur!”

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"Almost!" she laughed, and her lifted face had the elusive, gossamery beauty of one who had had traffic with the mysteries of witches. "I feel as though I have been standing still and stagnant in eldritch gloom for quite as long. I feel that I have lost whole months that might have been excitingly, vividly used. I seem to have enormous blank spaces to fill, and I'm greedy to fill them . . . greedy, greedy."

Alban, lying on his back watching her animation, her too great animation, the intensity and feverishness of it, said soberly, "It's safer for people who are so hungry to eat delicately, Gilda."

"You think I am overdoing it," she laughed. "Oh, but I'm not. You can't overdo appreciation of beauty."

Alban was rather afraid *she* could. He was feeling that after the inhibitions of the past few months the pendulum was swinging back with too great violence. That wasn't good for people with pendulum natures. It foreshadowed a swing as violent the other way.

"No, one should go slow even with beauty," he said. "If one loves the sunlight on the hills and seas too intensely, one only hates the more a sea-mist that makes all things drab and clammy."

"I believe I'd adore a sea-mist, and see a wonder in its drabness," cried Gilda, in superb defiance.

That was another thing, her defiance.

There was no doubt about it, part of the intensity of her change was defiance of the things from which

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she had changed. And that meant a defiance of Edwin and his domination. It was, in fact, rather unpleasantly manifest. It was not enough for a nature like hers to swing violently away from misery to happiness. She had to be scornful of the misery, of the things that had made her miserable.

It was not enough for her to enjoy a vision of the swinging hills and sea. She had to be contemptuous of the self that had been blinded to the sea and the hills.

The note came up again and again. "What a little fool I have been to allow my eyes to be drawn away from things like this," she would say.

Or: "One can give up too much of oneself. One can be too plastic, and one simply gains misery by it. If one surrenders one's whole self one has nothing to fall back upon."

"Aren't you surrendering your whole self now, Gilda?" Alban asked a little anxiously. "You are giving yourself so entirely to this that when you go back—"

"To what?" she demanded fiercely, defiant again, defiant always.

"To your old mood," he said after hesitation. He knew he ought to say "To Edwin," but he could not. "When you get back to your old mood the reaction may be as drastic."

"You're wrong," she laughed back. "In the first place I am not going back to my old mood. I can see that I have been quite stupid. I have given way where I ought to have been firm. I've surrendered

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too much of myself, been the prey of—of, well, alien conditions. In future I'm going to be myself, to maintain myself firmly.” There was a high and lovely colour in her cheeks as she spoke, the colour of defiance. She stared out over the hills.

“And all this,” she cried, “is going to help me to be firm. That's the second thing. I shall have all this to fall back on. I won't feel so—so bereft of support. If the worst comes to the worst I shall be able to bear it—with this.” She was still staring out over the hills, speaking as though he were not present. “One must assert one's individuality. If one surrenders one is nothing, has no defences.”

Later in the week she said apropos of nothing in particular: “After all, if Edwin can go his way, I can go mine, too. He doesn't surrender, why should I?”

Alban knew the answer quite well. But he could not tell her that she had no chance on those lines with Edwin; she was a creature of surrenders and Edwin wasn't.

He could see now that it was the all-powerful nature of her emotions that made her not merely what she was now, but what she had been when she arrived. If she could surrender tremendously to enthusiasms, her surrender to dejections and fears could be no less tremendous.

She had the great qualities and defects of a nature whole-heartedly, nobly generous. She gave all and with a splendid spontaneity of spirit. A fine trait, a splendid trait. But it had its dangers. A woman

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who pours herself out unstintedly in finer emotions, must also pour herself out unstintedly in her miseries. That wasn't a good thing at all. It made her helpless in her fears, made her a prey to anyone who could command that fear and misery. . . . No, it wasn't good. It was worse when a nature like that was subject to a nature like Edwin's. . . . "Intimidated into doing things she detests for fear of losing him," Rosamund had written of Gilda. "That's what it amounts to, just plain fear of loss. And the brute knows it and turns the thumb-screw. . . ."

ii

Gilda maintained her high, defiant spirit through the days that followed. She said: "I've had a good, solid moral overhaul. I'm going back to Earlhampton a new woman, a resolute woman. I'm not going to sit about waiting—waiting for things to happen. I'm going to go straight ahead with the things I want to do, and the other things will have to fit in with me. I'm going to take up the course of modern authors at the University, and go regularly through the symphony concerts at the Institute. Life's going to have *that* backbone, anyhow."

That was defiance. And it gave him a picture of her sitting at home in the vague, exquisite dusk of the Conroy house waiting for Edwin to call; waiting; doing nothing at all, simply sitting there until the man who dominated her chose to come. And then when he didn't come, sitting again and waiting

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again. Dead hours, wasted hours, miserable, heart-breaking hours, and she was telling him that she was going to change all that. Defiance!

She was telling him that she was going to break away into the literature Edwin pointedly despised and the music that bored him to yawns. She was going her own way and he would follow or not. Defiance!

She planned her autumn and winter with a fierce, clear enthusiasm, an enthusiasm much too fierce. It was less a natural instinct for her own enrichment than an attack on Edwin. Alban could see that in every detail. She *would* see these people whom Edwin loathed and made her neglect. She would *not* go to those dances which gave Edwin peculiar satisfaction. Defiance again. Always defiance, too much insistence on it.

And yet it seemed to answer the test. It seemed to uphold her when Edwin wrote that he could not come down on the Friday they had agreed upon. She had a laugh, a laugh that sounded genuine, if slightly contemptuous, on her lips as she told Alban.

"Does he say when he will come?" asked Alban.

"He leaves that deliciously in the air—that's Edwin's way," she said. "I expect I am to be tantalised. Come for a walk, Alban. I prefer concrete scenic facts to the tactics of Edwin."

They went for a walk, and she was in tearing spirits. In Combe-beneath-Buddle they had a clotted cream tea. They discussed vividly the local legend of certain Mysterious Strangers who had come

to that spot in foreign ships centuries ago and had founded a fabulous civilisation among the woad-painted Britons.

"Joseph of Arimathea is said to have been their leader, of course," Alban said. "He always is. Every river estuary between here and the Sandwich Flats in Kent has the same legend, and it is always Joseph of Arimathea."

"I have a much better theory," laughed Gilda. "I think it was the discovery of Europe by America. I think the Mysterious Visitants were adventurous seamen from Aztec or pre-Aztec civilisation. They were nearly done to death on the Altars of the Sun because they fancied that dry land existed over the edge of the world beyond the Dark Sea, and monster, hairy barbarians dwelt in those lands. The priests proved in loud voices that Tezcatlipoca—I hope it was Tezcatlipoca—had created Mexico as the centre of the world, and all was void outside, and there was no such land as Europe. But the hardy explorers sailed out, and were carried by the trade winds through distress and storm until they landed upon England. There they discovered barbarous inhabitants of low culture and primitive and unpleasant instincts, not at all comparable with the high moral and social level of the American. And they settled and tried to civilise us."

"That's rather nice," Alban laughed. "It's a sort of revenge for Cabot and Columbus."

"I'm prepared to prove my statements," she cried. And she went on to prove them. She insisted that

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this was the way certain American words, such as Fall for Autumn had become current in parts of England, Sussex, for instance. She also declared that the huge remains at Stonehenge indicated that a race with sky-scraper instincts quite foreign to the wattle-hut and suburban villa instincts of the aborigines must once have existed in the land.

She was gay, vivacious, bubbling. Her defiance seemed a settled quality. She spoke no more of Edwin's visit, and it seemed she was not in the least upset by her disappointment. So she went on through Friday, through Saturday, gay, unconcerned, ready not to trouble her mind about Edwin if he did not trouble his about her.

Sunday the same. Her spirits were, if anything, higher. Even Alban was convinced that her attitude was real. He did not realise that underneath things were different, that the pendulum that had swung so far was swinging as vehemently back. He was unrealising even when she said, as they talked of the letters he had received from home, "How is the Factory—busy?"

"Oswald sees ruin ahead," smiled Alban. "He always does. He says things are pretty slow. That means the usual summer slackness."

"He's probably sent Edwin round to whip up trade," she said, with a laugh that deceived him, for he answered without thinking:

"Oh, no, there is something in Rosamund's letter which suggests that Edwin is eating the lotus at home."

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"That means he *did* begin his holiday on Friday as arranged," said Gilda. Her tone made Alban recognise he had built too much on her pretence of indifference.

She was gay at once, too gay, but he saw through her now, and cursed Edwin. What was the fellow doing? Something to annoy Gilda? Something deliberately meant to upset her? He was on his guard. When she asked later, and with a casualness that hurt him by its effort, "Did Rosamund or Oswald say anything about Edwin's movements, Alban?" he was ready.

"Nothing at all," he answered. "Rosamund just said he was about, that was all."

"She didn't say whether he had gone to the Forest, to Brackenhurst, I suppose?"

He was startled, hurt that she should know about Brackenhurst. He answered curtly, "No, she gave no details," and felt that he would like to punch Edwin's head.

He couldn't help feeling that Gilda had got to know about Brackenhurst from Edwin himself. He did not know why he felt that, save that he did, and powerfully. It was, after all, the sort of thing that Edwin was quite capable of. He knew it would torment her, disturb her, make her more plastic in his hands.

He could see the poison working before his eyes.

Gilda had begun to think about Brackenhurst and it was undermining her defiance. Alban wondered how much she knew, whether she knew definitely

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or merely guessed there was a Mrs. Hogarth. Whether she knew or not she seemed to recognise some rivalry. She was becoming unnerved. Her determination not to care, to be happy in herself alone was being sapped away.

It was queer and distressing. Alban felt as Rosamund had felt, he couldn't quite understand Gilda. In the past week he could have sworn that she had thrown off the yoke of love. She had been herself, independent. She had been an individual with so little in common with Edwin, so little to bind her, that Alban felt she was emancipated. He would not have been surprised to hear her say that she had realised how deep the gulf was between her and Edwin, that she had decided to break with him. When she was out of touch with him, away from his physical domination, she seemed to see things clearly as they were. And yet here she was, a woman of intelligence, as Rosamund had said, reduced to hopeless misery at the hint that there was danger of losing him.

"I believe he's stage-managed it deliberately," Alban thought, furiously. "I believe if the brute had come straight down here on Friday, with her in the condition she was then, she would have seen him as he really is, as things really are, and she would have ended the miserable business. And I believe he knew that, and is simply tantalising her—playing on her nerves." He stared out from his veranda at the view, not seeing it at all. "The damn cur," he said aloud. "He knows the power of vague-

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ness, indecision, uncertain fear. Practice has made him an expert."

On Wednesday, defying a hint in Gilda's note, Alban went in to Iamouth to see her. He did see her. He found her on the front, standing a little apart from Edwin, poignantly apart.

Not that Edwin minded or reacted to that pathetic aloofness. There was another woman who stood close enough, a big woman, in structure as bold and flashing as the heavily accented gold of her hair. She was a woman with a temperament as loud and as unconcerned as her laugh. Alban had only to see her standing there, so simple and good-tempered, so certain that nobody on earth could take exception to her presence, to know that he was meeting the widow, Mrs. Hogarth.

### iii

Alban's arrival relieved the situation.

He could not make Gilda less miserable, but he could make that misery less public. He could save Gilda from being an unsatisfactory third in this party which included her fiancé.

Whether Edwin resented his coming as a disturbance to his plan he did not know, but it seemed to Alban that there was a plan of some sort, and that Mrs. Hogarth was part of it, and that, very quickly, Edwin brought him into it, too.

He said with detestable aplomb: "I guessed you'd be over, Alban. Gilda tells me you have

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not seen each other for a half-day—or is it a whole day?”

He was at his old trick. Alban said quietly, evenly, “Are you asking me to give you a public thrashing to cure you of your bounderism?”

Edwin’s eyes glinted, but he did not fail to score: “Got you as bad as that, has it?” he said with a light sneer, and then, as Alban’s right arm stiffened, “I don’t think you have met Mrs. Hogarth. Emmie, come here and shake hands with the family paragon of all the virtues.”

Emmie gave him her hand, large, fleshed, and strong, ending the clasp with a little lingering squeeze, as though she were testing him out by some Masonic sign of sex. She said she was pleased to meet any brother of Ed’s. Not sarcasm that, but one of the stock texts she employed in lieu of conversation.

Alban did not dislike Emmie. She had a big, enfolding geniality. She was indestructibly simple and unaware of antagonisms. She was quite unaffected and unperceptive. She liked being with Ed. She even liked being with Ed’s present companions. It simply didn’t occur to her that the liking was not shared by them.

She was a big woman, who would be larger as time and her undisciplined instinct for luxury conquered her. One realised from her taut, fine garments that a secret but ruthless battle was being waged between her stays and the flesh. Her blouse was splendid and congested with her breasts. Her thick,

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soft, and magnificent neck already hinted the birth of many chins.

But for the present she was still rather fine in her massiveness. There was a Boadicean sumptuousness about her. And her manner with its expansive simplicity was not unattractive. She was a jolly woman, coarse-fibred perhaps, but genuine, good-hearted, and generous. She was without particular intelligence, but she had enough of worldly currency to make her a good companion, to make her indeed an excellent companion for Edwin.

Obviously she and Edwin had whole worlds in common. That became apparent through the day. She was so much more at home with Edwin that, on the few occasions when she tried at some vague call of politeness to talk exclusively with Alban or Gilda, she seemed to feel herself out of her metier. Those talks became silences so sodden that she only too willingly went back to Edwin. And the dank silence that had been before was immediately dissipated by their irrepressible exchanges and the loud ring of her laugh. She was certainly a better companion for Edwin than Gilda, who seemed awkward and stricken dumb in her misery. And it seemed to Alban that Edwin deliberately underlined the fact.

“Is this,” he wondered, “a rather vulgar form of hint? Is this Edwin’s way of showing Gilda that they don’t suit each other, and that she ought to relinquish him to Mrs. Hogarth, who is obviously more compatible with him?”

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He might have thought so, only he remembered that Edwin had had his chance for ending the engagement and had refused to give Gilda up. If he still held to that, then his conduct was simply incomprehensible.

They spent a detestable day—that is, Gilda and he did. Edwin and Mrs. Hogarth seemed happy and satisfied enough. Gilda and he were like two ghosts outside their hearty, fleshly world. They trailed behind the firm, vigorous bodies, hearing their voices and their clear, loud laughter, but unable to join in, unable to take part. They were as lost spirits outside the veil, wretched, helpless, hopeless, bereft of will and physical attributes.

It was horrible. They could do nothing. They could not even support each other. They could only wander behind the unconcerned and laughing pair, and note how intimately and well they got on together.

A flash of Edwin's wit startled Emmie Hogarth out of the very slight discipline she put on in company. Her laugh was abruptly terrific and discordant. She struck Edwin playfully, reprovingly on the arm. In that moment she was starkly vulgar, and Gilda, wincing under the laugh, cried, "What *do* men see in such women?"

"I suppose she amuses him," said Alban, lamely, but Gilda was already angry at the slip she had made.

"I suppose that's it. I like her. She's good-hearted and genuine."

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Alban had himself recovered, but he refused to let the thing slide back into pretence.

"What possessed him to bring her here?" he snapped.

"Oh, he didn't bring her," she said, anxious even yet to defend Edwin. "She heard he was coming and ran him over in her car."

"She goes back then?"

"After tea."

"Edwin too?"

"No," she said slowly. "Edwin is staying on for a week. He's been able to get away after all."

Alban registered a resolve to speak his mind to Edwin at the first opportunity. But he had nothing more to say, because all he could think about was Edwin's damn blackguardism in bringing that woman here.

It was Gilda who broke down the silence:

"Who is she, Alban?" she asked, trying to be casual.

"I don't know," he answered. "I only know she's a widow, very well off, and that she lives at Brackenhurst."

"She's rich and lives rather dashingly in a fine house, she does exactly what she likes, shocks her neighbours, but attracts quite a number by her—her splash."

Alban stared at her: "I don't know anything about that. I'm rather surprised you know it, Gilda."

"Oh, I know," she said, and she looked over the sea with dreary eyes. She went on: "I don't know

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anything *real*. I've not met her before, I've never seen her house—Edwin has never *actually* mentioned her to me. But I've heard—whispers, you know. And he laughs instead of denies . . . I mean I know he visits her a lot, and I've asked him."

"Oswald knows about her," Alban said. "He told me there was nothing in it."

"That's what his laugh—Edwin's—implied. But I don't know. . . . Of course, she's his sort—in many ways. Her gaiety and boldness are the things he likes. She seems to live in a tearing, free-handed way at Brackenhurst, keeps open house with plenty of company for dining, dancing, motoring, racing, and cards. She sometimes dashes into Earlhampton to fill boxes at the Paradium. They generally crack jokes with personal friends among the comedians on the stage. Edwin loves all that sort of thing you know."

Alban, not being able to deny it, walked on silently. He stared dumbly at the back of the pair before them. They were inexpressibly bright. They were, it seemed, talking with long-wonted intimacy, and Mrs. Hogarth's hand was resting on Edwin's arm, perhaps to enforce attention, but certainly with the appearance of habitual naturalness.

Gilda seemed fascinated by that hand. "She is fond of him, too," she said, "I'm sure she is. *She's* ready to give him anything he wants—*anything*."

There was a curious note in Gilda's voice, a note of fear that was almost despair. It irritated Alban. He said almost sharply: "Well, let her give him

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anything and everything, Gilda. And let him take it. Don't put yourself out about the fellow."

She looked at him quickly, dropped her eyes, and her breath caught. But she said nothing, and again the dreary silence of ghosts drifted down over them.

### iv

Mrs. Hogarth delayed her going till the last possible minute. She left with gusto, making all the parade of her large self and her scarcely larger car that her peculiar nature demanded. It was part of the parade that made her lean out of the window and in her loud, jolly, final voice arrange to meet Edwin on the very day he left Iamouth for Earhampton. She made the engagement with a sense of finality, as though she had complete control of his movements. Gilda and Alban stood by the motor, feeling that they were completely outside this intimacy.

Gilda made excuses and vanished, Alban got his hat to walk back to the Farm, Edwin was going to an hotel.

"Better walk a little way with me, Edwin," said Alban, in a harsh voice.

Edwin grinned at him in his cool, sly, assured way.

"I think most decidedly better not," he said.

They were away from the Conroy's lodgings by then, standing in a quiet lane. Alban glared at his brother's red and insolent face.

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"That means you realise you've been acting like a cad," he snapped.

"No, it means I realise you're a bit of a bore," grinned Edwin.

"You've acted like a cad," Alban insisted. "You know it. To bring that woman here was an insult."

"Not an insult," grinned Edwin, and he seemed to say the words with a peculiar relish. "Insult was not the idea at all."

"You're simply a cur," snapped Alban. "A damn cad. You're not fit for a girl like Gilda. You're not fit to touch her."

"One of the discoveries you've been making together during the last weeks?" asked Edwin, with a leer in his sneering voice.

Alban glared, saw the abominable suggestion in Edwin's face. His body bunched. There was no doubt that he was ready to fly at his brother's throat like a wolf.

Edwin saw it, laughed softly, stepped back, and swung his heavy stick significantly. He had already told Alban that its head was loaded with lead.

"That wouldn't stop me," cried Alban.

"I know," said Edwin, with a curious ugly softness. "But it'd mark you prettily. I owe you a mark or two, you—you self-righteous swine."

It was the venom in his tone that stopped Alban, not the stick. It was an appalling tone. It was brutish in its hate. Looking at his brother, he saw that the face was brutish too. The smile was still

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there, but the lips were back too far over the teeth, and their bareness showed the animal.

He saw that Edwin meant exactly what he said. He *wanted* to mark him. He wanted to strike and pulp his face with that loaded stick. He was only waiting for the excuse. He was eager for the excuse.

Alban was appalled. He had never liked his brother's habits, his evilness; but he had never really disliked him. Certainly he had never even been touched by the hatred that glared out of Edwin's sly, pert eyes. He was shocked that anyone should feel like that towards him, and that the person should be his own brother.

And, being appalled, he was abruptly cooled. He suddenly realised what would happen if he fought Edwin as every one of his instincts seemed to bid him fight Edwin. He saw, quite coldly, that once they began to fight they would stop at nothing. Edwin would go on and on slashing at his face with the leaded stick, and he would go on until he tore Edwin's throat right out. He saw it quite plainly. He saw all the consequences to the one of them who survived (he seemed to know it would be himself), saw the effect on the Kent family and Kent Drugs, to Rosamund and Dunstan, whom he suddenly knew he loved intensely, and, above all, to Gilda. All this he saw in a flash, as Edwin glared like an animal, and held his stick with shaking eagerness.

All in a flash, and in a flash Edwin saw him relax, and the glare on his own face softened to mere disappointed rage.

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He began to spit taunts at Alban—a filthy stream of lacerating abuse, coupling Alban's righteousness with his apparent cowardice, dragging in his "crankiness," his pious airs, and tangling them unpleasantly, disgustingly in innuendo with Gilda. The stream was beastly and ceaseless, and should have been searching. It wasn't. It merely made Alban sick, sick at the sound of it, sick that this man was his brother, sick that he was to be the husband of Gilda.

In the middle of it he made a gesture that caused Edwin to swing his stick alertly. Alban put his own hands behind him, half turned away.

"Good night," he said harshly. "Better go home, Edwin."

Edwin slipped in front of him.

"I thought you'd funk it," he snarled. "The mean streak is there. You're not a man. . . ."

Alban went straight at him. The stick hovered for a moment, but it was Alban's cold will that was the stronger. It was Edwin who funk'd the stroke, and in that moment of hesitation Alban had his brother's right arm. One hand was behind the elbow pushing, one hand on the wrist, pulling. Edwin's muscles were unable to resist the strain. He gave a little yelp as he felt his elbow giving; he dropped the stick.

Alban picked the stick from the ground and threw it over the hedge.

Without looking round at Edwin he walked straight ahead towards Moap's Farm.

To his astonishment, Gilda and his brother came up to see the farm a couple of days later. His astonishment was increased by Gilda's extreme happiness. The wonder of this quite obliterated the incident between Edwin and himself.

Gilda was radiantly, deliciously happy. He had never seen her so possessed by it. And such colour, beauty, and vivacity did it give her that it seemed to him that she had bloomed anew—or perhaps only now had fully bloomed. Yes, it seemed that she was changed. There was a fullness, a richness about her manner that was subtly strange.

Perhaps that was the sheer contrast between her as he saw her now and as he had seen her on that miserable day of Mrs. Hogarth's visit. But gradually he felt it wasn't that. He saw that this happiness, so unlimited, unfettered, and indeed defiant, was new to him because it was a form of happiness he had never seen in her, never been able to give her. It was a happiness only Edwin could give her. That idea reached certainty as their short visit went on—her happiness sprang entirely from Edwin.

He could see that Edwin was much more to her than looking over the Farm, though she insisted that she had come here to show Edwin the Farm. He saw that anything he might say or explain was outside her. Edwin had only to speak, look, make a gesture, and she left Alban in the middle of a sentence to attend to Edwin.

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She was beautiful. She never lost her singular distinction, she never became gushing or too fond. There she was, completely and utterly absorbed in their peculiar and sacred intimacy. Alban and the rest of the world were a thousand miles outside.

Alban was puzzled. It seemed to him that something more than mere "making it up" with Edwin had happened to her. She seemed more settled, more certain in her absorption in him. "It's as though she were utterly sure of him now and knew Mrs. Hogarth to be completely wiped out."

That was exactly her attitude. She seemed absolutely outside her old fears, timidities, jealousies, miseries. Perhaps something had happened. Perhaps Mrs. Hogarth was indeed wiped out by that happening—by some understanding, by some tremendous coming together that had showed them exactly what they meant to each other. Whatever it was, it had been something tremendous, for Gilda's change was complete. All the differences in outlook, tastes, and way of life seemed to have vanished. They'd been swallowed up in something bigger, Alban thought.

His own interest in the farm trickled away under her sumptuous inattention. He became even a little irritated at the impersonal quality of himself on this fine afternoon and on his own estate. He stared at Gilda, wondering. He asked himself why she had taken the trouble to come here at all.

"Unless," he thought, "it's to show me that things

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are changed, and that things are all right between her and Edwin."

As he thought this, he turned from Gilda's face and caught sight of Edwin's eyes fixed on him. He thought Edwin was smirking, that his pert, sly, sneering eyes had a meaning—a meaning even for himself.

"Perhaps they have," he thought. "Perhaps he's 'showing me,' letting me see that after all *he* really is Gilda's lover. He is the one with the real power."

It was only a little later that he realised that the Farm was but an excuse to get away from old Conroy, from Iamouth, from everybody but themselves. Having rattled through the grounds in the most perfunctory way, they were eager to be off.

"You'd better stay to tea," said Alban, surprised. "You'll never get back to Iamouth in time."

"Do you think we'd better stay to tea, Gilda?" said Edwin, his smile into her eyes a little mocking. Her glance seemed to be pinioned by his. There was a curious deep blush on her cheeks and neck, and her chin was tipped upwards.

"It'll be all right, Alban," she said. "We'll get there in time."

Edwin laughed softly as she said that, and she blushed again; as though her blush cloaked some delectable private joke of their own.

Alban guessed what that joke might be a little later—at about six o'clock.

Standing on his veranda, he chanced to look at the long, sharply white cliff road that went towards Iamouth. On that road, breasting the rise near the

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cliff top, were two figures and they were unmistakably those of his brother and Gilda.

They had neither got to Iamouth nor to the gardens for tea then, and they had not even attempted to get there.

Alban, with his knowledge of the idyllic nooks and coppices along that road, did not have to ask what it was that had made the lovers forget such a trivial thing as tea. He smiled, a little wryly, perhaps.

### vi

Alban saw neither Gilda nor Edwin during the ten days that followed. They did not come near him. They did not even invite him to join them. It was only business taking him into Iamouth on the tenth day that brought him across Gilda.

She was sitting on the cliff by the road as he had seen her on her first coming to Iamouth. As on that occasion she did not hear his approach until he was close to her.

But the reason was entirely different. She was sitting there dreaming, not in misery, but in infinite content. Her happiness was soft, luxurious, serene.

It was with the same slow contentment that she saw him. She accepted him into her landscape rather than greeted him. She neither wanted him nor disliked his presence. He was just there, part of the niceness of everything.

"I was just dreaming," she smiled. "I'm doing a lot of that, you know."

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"You looked as though you were enjoying it."

"I was," she said softly, her eyes on the sea. "This has been quite the happiest holiday I've ever spent."

"And reading, too," he said, looking down at her book of poems.

"I'm going back to it, I feel so steady and settled now, Alban, so comfortable. I'm feeling luscious. Books and everything are fitting in again."

"And what's Edwin doing?" he asked.

"Edwin?" she asked, as though wondering why he put the question.

"Will he be along here presently?"

"Edwin's gone home," she laughed, as though he had made a stupid mistake. "He went home three days ago."

"I didn't know *that*," he said.

She stared at him, and then she laughed again, "I suppose we did forget to tell you."

Her tone said, "We forgot everything except each other."

"I suppose he'll be coming down again."

"I suppose so," she said quite indifferently, as though Edwin was so certain a thing now that it mattered not at all whether he came down or not.

"Sure to," said Alban. "You've got a month more here."

She was staring dreamily, indolently, out over the slow-slurring sea. "What was that?" she said presently.

"You have a month more here," he said again, not quite certain she was attending even then.

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"Oh, no," she answered, "six weeks." Again her gaze grew delicate and vague. He realised that she did not particularly want him there. He rose and said he must get into Iamouth now. She smiled vaguely at him, did not bid him stop—did not suggest he should come to their place to tea, did not offer any further meeting.

Turning when he reached the road, he saw she was back in her dreams and had probably forgotten she had been speaking to him.

### vii

Four days later he caught sight of her swinging along the road over the cliff. Making sure that she was coming to the Farm he went down his own small roadway to meet her.

He saw her through the trees before he reached his gate, and stopped for a moment, hidden from her, because he thought her actions strange.

She was standing in the main road by his gate, and she seemed to be hesitating whether to come in or go on walking. Twice she took a step towards the gate, and twice turned away. He could see indecision and a sort of stubbornness warring in her face. Then, just as he thought she was coming up to the Farm, she swung about with a resolute gesture and continued her walk along the road. He sprang across an angle of his ground and was standing high on a bank behind his private hedge as she came by.

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"Hallo, Gilda," he cried. "Cutting the Farm dead?"

She looked up at him first with a sort of anxiety, and then with an affectation of boldness.

"I am, I'm afraid," she cried back in a too comradely voice. "I'm off on a long, slogging 'think' walk. I nearly did come in, though."

"It would have interrupted the think?"

"Horribly!" she laughed.

"Then I'd better not offer to come, too?"

She seemed to hang indecisive for a moment, then "No, I think not. You notice I was tempted, but I feel that this has got to be all me with me."

"I understand," he said. "I suppose you haven't noticed that you have neglected the herbs lately?"

"I have, terribly," she answered a trifle too earnestly. "I feel so mean about it. But I don't seem to have been able to do anything but sit and purr on the cliff."

"Oh, well, purring is a happy sort of condition."

"Yes," she laughed. "How are things?"

"Regular and in order," he laughed back. "No complaints, if no particular profit in sight. But I've done what I set out to do. Very shortly now, a few weeks in fact, I shall be able to leave the place in charge of my foreman and go back to Earlhampton. I'm . . ."

But he saw she was not interested at all. She had shown a polite, blank face all the time he spoke. Only at the word Earlhampton did she waken . . .

"How is everybody at Earlhampton?" she asked.

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"More or less the same. But you've heard all the news from Edwin?"

Alban said it as a matter of conversation, and saw no reason why her face should go scarlet at the words. She knew that she had been stupid and covered it up boldly.

"Oh, Edwin!" she said lightly. "I don't get *news* from Edwin. He is positively the worst letter-writer in the world. He says nothing that I want him to say."

Her tone was at once possessive and vexed. Alban had heard numberless wives say much the same thing in much the same manner. She went on quickly: "I generally get my real and informing letters from Rosamund. But I've neglected Rosamund shockingly of late—as I've neglected everybody. In consequence I'm without a scrap of news and hungry for it."

Alban had just had a letter from Rosamund. He took it from his pocket and dropped it down to her. It was a long letter, full of gossip in Rosamund's most incisive and impertinent manner. There were one or two things for Gilda to laugh over. Alban watched her, waiting for the laugh. It did not come. She went through the letter hungrily, swiftly, not really reading it so much as searching it for something. Then she went back and searched again. She threw the letter back to Alban with a cheerful, conventional expression. Only she was manifestly disappointed at something.

After she had gone Alban wondered what about

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the letter had disappointed her. It was only after he had read it through again himself that it occurred to him that the explanation might be the absence of Edwin's name. Edwin's name did not figure at all, and there was no chronicle of his doings.

And, yet, could that be the reason? It didn't fit in with Gilda's happiness. Edwin and she had most certainly banished all differences. And Edwin wrote to her. She had said that herself. There was no reason why she wanted news of Edwin. But she had certainly searched for some sort of news that was not in the letter.

### viii

During the next week Alban became aware that Gilda was deliberately avoiding him.

Twice she seemed to turn aside so as not to meet him.

Once, when walking down a hill, he saw her on the road on the opposite side of the valley. He waved to her. Though she did not make an answering gesture he confidently expected to meet her in the wooded bottom of the little valley. Not until he had passed through the little wood and started to climb the hill, did he realise that she must have left the road and plunged through the trees out of sight.

Had that been an accident? Or had it been deliberate? Of course he could not say. She might not have seen him, and there were enticing foot-paths along the wooded bottom. He gave her the benefit

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of the doubt. Or he thought he did. As a matter of fact his impression of her desire to avoid him was so strong that he did not even have to resist the impulse to follow and walk with her. He knew she did not want him.

The next occasion was more significant. She had been sitting in her old place on the top of the cliff outside Iamouth. As he walked down the familiar road he felt certain she must have seen him. He saw—he was certain even at a distance—the vague oval of her face turned towards him. He was also confident that she half rose. But she sank back again and remained passive, staring out to sea. So he had seen her when he went into the dip that hid her from his view. When he emerged from the dip she was gone. Gone completely—and much too swiftly. There was no sign of her walking anywhere.

He knew she was avoiding him. Why, he couldn't say. He was hurt, as he was puzzled. It couldn't be that she had taken a dislike to him, he felt certain. It might be, however, that she was acting on a hint or a direct word from Edwin. It would be like Edwin to put a check to a friendship that Alban found so satisfying. Again, it might be a mere intuition. Gilda might have felt that the brothers were at daggers drawn, and had instinctively gone over to Edwin's side, as she had apparently gone completely to him in affection.

Whatever the reason, Alban's feet rather dragged

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as he entered Iamouth. It had been his intention to call on the Conroys, and this new attitude of Gilda's was dismaying. However, reaching the street in which they lodged he resolved to go in, if for no other reason than to know the worst.

Old Conroy was not affected, anyhow. He was pleased to see Alban and began to develop, quite whimsically, a new theory of Utopia in which the whole world was to be made contentedly rustic by laws which would sentence to death anybody guilty of progress. Gilda, he said, was out at the moment, but would certainly return for tea.

The maid who brought the tea surprised them by offering apologies for Gilda. Gilda had a bad headache and was lying down.

"But is she in?" asked old Conroy. "I saw her go out myself, and I certainly didn't see her come back."

Yes, Gilda was in. She had come in a few minutes after the gentleman had arrived. She had gone straight to her room. Old Conroy stared at the girl with a puzzled and slightly perturbed air. He said: "She must have come in by the back door, then? She did? Well, that is very extraordinary."

The extraordinariness seemed to keep him silent during the meal. It seemed to Alban there was more than the present happening worrying him. His air was withdrawn, vague, perturbed, puzzled.

Towards the end of tea he shot a glance under his brows at the young man. "You and Gilda are

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not at war are you?" His light tone masked a deeper feeling.

Alban told him no; that he was under the impression that he and Gilda were good friends. The answer instead of helping old Conroy seemed to harry him the more.

He said suddenly, while lighting a cigarette, "Hmm! and it's all well between her and that brother of yours, eh?"

"Good Lord," said Alban. "What do you mean?"

"Lovers' quarrels," jerked old Conroy.

"I don't think that's so—now. I should say they were on the very best of terms."

"So should I," murmured old Conroy. "So should I. I should have said they were getting along better than before." He finished lighting his cigarette. He sighed, shrugged, smiled whimsically. "The young!" he said. "The imponderable young! They mystify all over fifty. Best leave them alone, I suppose."

Alban hammered the whole matter out on his walk back. But there was nothing definite to be got out of it save that Gilda meant to avoid him. That might be Edwin's fault. That might be her own choosing. Whatever the reason, the fact was there. Gilda did not want to meet him.

It hurt. No question that it hurt. Its hurt occupied his mind more than anything else. He paid very little attention to old Conroy's vague uneasiness. Old Conroy, outside exact science, was always vague.

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The hurt was the thing. He'd miss not merely Gilda's visits and their walks and her letters, but also the feeling that she was interested in him and his work. He realised how stimulating, how supporting that interest had been. Without it he felt rather dreary and blank. Even the Farm, such a fine and satisfactory thing only a week ago, appeared now entirely unsatisfying.

In this mood it seemed to him that he saw the Farm dispassionately, and as it actually was—as Oswald saw it. It was a waste. It was chucking money down a sink. He reviewed all he had done, and saw that it was bad. There wasn't a real living in it. After all that work the place wouldn't pay a profit for years. Not for years. It wasn't even going to pay its way for a couple of years at least. By scratching and scraping he could just about get together the wages of his foremen and hands, and that was all. Oswald and his mother had been right. There was nothing in the Farm. It was an expensive fad.

He was acutely miserable. He became worse when he received a letter from Rosamund a few weeks later. One paragraph in the letter was a real affront. It gave the news that the Conroys had returned to Earlhampton.

Alban was thoroughly upset by that. He had not expected them to leave for two weeks. They had gone without even letting him know. They had packed up and left as casually as though he was

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not within a hundred miles of their neighbourhood. They had not even sent a post-card. He had had to hear the news second-hand from his sister.

That was the worst shock Gilda had dealt him. For a time it upset him so much that he could not believe it was true. Out of this state of mind he evolved the idea that something untoward had happened. Some imperative business had called old Conroy home suddenly—or perhaps he had fallen ill. He went into Iamouth to find out.

He found the landlady sour and hostile.

The Conroys had defrauded her out of two weeks' letting; and it was that young woman's fault. All her fault. The old man was comfortable enough. *He* was quite willing to stay on for the full time, but she wouldn't let him. On at him day in and day out to go back home, she had been. Said she was tired of the place; said there was something she wanted to do at home. Said she was bored, fed-up! Always at him, she had been, and he, peace-loving old gent, had given in. And they had gone off in a hurry.

"No, it wasn't no business calling him back, an' it wasn't no illness, not of *'is*, anyhow," said the woman, with a weighted and venomous look, "tho' I might think twice before I sed that about that gerl. I ain't so simple as I seem, I ain't. It was all the gerl's doing. She was in a bustin' 'urry to get back 'ome, an' the old gent simply had to give in." And they had gone, all of a day. Nothing was too quick

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for her. No, they had left no message. . . . "She 'adn't 'ad any time for thinking of messages. . . ."

Alban stalked back to the Farm coldly, blankly.

"Oh, well," he kept on saying, "it doesn't matter."

He could think of nothing else. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

## *Chapter IX*

### i

FOUR weeks of hard work on the Farm with the mind blank and with no particular news. Then suddenly two queer letters.

Oswald's letter really was startling. Oswald suddenly affable and optimistic instead of curt. Oswald unexpectedly recognising that all was going well with the world and Kent Drugs; admitting that things were moving along more smoothly than the mind of Oswald would have given them credit for; that business was settled, affairs all in order, and needing no particular anxiety or attention—Kent Drugs, in fact, in need of no special driving or keying up. Unusual all that in a mind addicted to the joys of anticipating bankruptcy.

Unusual, more than unusual, his sudden affection for the Herb Farm. Alban's report of the Herb Farm had given Oswald comfort and pleasure. Alban was obviously on the right lines with the Herb Farm. Alban was apparently on a good thing after all. Developed along the lines suggested and with the personal care Alban was giving to it the Herb Farm must in time become a good property, an asset. The samples of Poppy, Aconite and Belladonna sent were encouraging. Alban was obviously improving

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the strains there. They were ahead of old Moap's cultivation, as much as old Moap had been ahead of Continental growing. There was no doubt in Oswald's mind that Alban's personal work, Alban's personal supervision, was doing wonders, and this being so—and here was the queer point—Oswald was quite certain that Alban would be unwise to leave the Farm. In fact, he thought he should not leave it for three, four, perhaps more months.

Surprising Oswald should say that. Rather more surprising that he should insist on it.

There was no doubt that he insisted on it. He came back to the point several times, emphasised the peculiar need of Alban's presence at the Farm at this critical juncture. "Is it critical?" Alban grinned. "How does Oswald know it's critical?" Oswald made it plain that Alban was not needed at all at the Factory. Yes, Alban had better stay on another three or four months at Margarettung. The letter concluded by assuming that that was what Alban would do.

Alban was amused at first and then suspicious. It was a mean attitude to take up when old Oswald was trying to be decent, was being generous, in fact, but he couldn't help himself. His knowledge of Oswald, his instincts about Oswald made him mutter, "What's he driving at? What's the game behind it?"

He couldn't see what was behind it. He could see no practical reason for anything underhand. No reason at all. He might have thought it something

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to do with his partnership in Kent Drugs, something to do with keeping him out of the partnership, only he did not think of the partnership at all. It had been definitely set aside when he came down to Margaretting. It would not really occur to him again until he got back to the Factory. And no other reason occurred to him. On the face of it, Oswald's was a genuine offer—and yet he asked himself, "What's behind it?"

That feeling, "What's behind it?" made him carry the letter about with him for three days deciding what his answer should be. He hadn't decided when Rosamund's letter came.

Rosamund's letter was not less queer than Oswald's—and it was more disturbing.

Rosamund said in her frank, ringing fashion: "Shouldn't be at all surprised if Oswald or Mother—or both—wrote to you to tell you to stay on at Margaretting. . . . They want you out of the way. . . . There is trouble between Edwin and Gilda, real trouble, I mean. . . . Frankly, I don't like the way the wind is setting. I really do believe you ought to come home. . . ."

Come home—why should he come home because his brother and Gilda were in difficulties? He caught another sentence. . . .

"Of course, I'm making trouble for myself, and, having adopted the pose of being *outside* all this sort of thing, I feel that I am an ass. . . . But there's rather too much of the you in me for complete, stoic calm. And I'm terribly fond of Gilda. And the

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atmosphere is bad—bad. . . . I'm certain our family is not going to be decent towards Gilda."

Alban sat still for half an hour, staring out over his view, not seeing it.

Abruptly he took out Oswald's letter, held it in his left hand, while he held Rosamund's in his right. It was as though he were balancing one against the other. And he was.

He was balancing Oswald's apparent generosity against Rosamund's truth. He was balancing the whole attitude of Oswald and his mother against the hard facts.

In that moment he saw nearly everything. He saw the real meaning of the Herb Farm—to them. He saw it through their eyes, not as a speculative venture, not as a fad of his, but as something that kept him out of harm's way, something that shut him up.

It was plain. Their real opinion of the Farm had never altered. It was to them a folly, a waste of time and money; it was a dangerous lunacy. They still thought that. They had not changed as he had thought. They had merely seen the opportunity the Farm gave for removing him from Earlhampton and from the neighbourhood of Edwin when things became difficult and dangerous.

It was plain. The whole history of his dealings with the Farm proved it. Each occasion he had come to the Farm, had been *sent* to the Farm, coincided with a big row about Edwin. The Farm had

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been a means of eliminating him as a danger to Edwin, to the family.

He saw it. He saw more. He saw why Gilda had behaved so queerly in the last days of her holiday. Edwin's work, of course. Exactly what Edwin had done did not matter, the thing was that it *was* his work. Alban had a vague feeling that he could reconstruct the happenings down here. He felt that Edwin had deliberately played with Gilda, played on her fears. All the moves of that game had been deliberate—his delay in coming down, his bringing the Hogarth woman with him. . . . All deliberate. Why? One would have to be Edwin to understand why. Its motive was some queer, debased pleasure in torment, perhaps—or perhaps it had been a plan to hit at him, Alban. That might be it. Edwin knew how intimate Gilda was with Alban, how she valued his companionship, so he had deliberately reduced her to a state of helpless misery and fear in order absolutely to sway her. And then—and then he had made love to her again, knowing how powerful, how tremendous were her reactions. And when he had got command of her completely by love, he had seen to it that she made a final break with his brother.

That explained a good deal. Not all, but a good deal. It explained why Gilda had avoided him, and why she had left Iamouth without even the courtesy of a farewell post-card.

With a savage gesture, Alban tore Oswald's letter

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across and across, and flung it from him. "That for your damned treachery," he shouted.

Sitting, thinking, he read Rosamund's letter through again and made up his mind. He would go home. He would face the thing properly this time. He would do what ought to have been done before—and he would not be put off. No, this time, by God, he would not be put off by Oswald or his mother or all the tribes of Kents.

He caught a sentence of Rosamund's: "Go carefully, old thing. It's dawning on me that Oswald's heaviness cloaks a devilish lot of slow, fat cunning. He can make an awful lot of trouble for you. Go slow . . ."

He thought it over. He'd go slow. He'd be cunning, too. He wrote a friendly and quite innocent letter to Oswald. He showed how pleased he was at Oswald's praise and appreciation. He enthused about the Farm. It was good of Oswald to make the offer of a further stay here—but it wasn't necessary. In fact, it was less than necessary. He had indeed made all his arrangements, and they were so far settled that he was actually starting back to Earlhampton on the morrow. There was no use in changing those plans now. It would upset things and cause needless expense. He hoped to arrive home about tea-time, when he would explain things more fully.

He posted the letter and began to pack, and after packing had a long talk with his foreman. He had

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spiked Oswald's guns, he thought. Oswald might not like that letter, but he could do nothing.

He was not quite right about that. As he walked to the station, he saw on the road ahead, as he had seen Gilda not so long ago, the figure of a telegraph boy on a bicycle. He realised what that might mean. As Gilda had vanished into the bushes at his approach, so he jumped into hiding and watched the boy free-wheeling by.

He was quite right in his surmise. Late that night he received a telegram re-directed from the Farm. It was from Oswald, telling him on no account to return to Earlhampton.

He had been wise to avoid that boy, he realised grimly, as he tore up the message and threw it into the fire of his old bedroom in Earlhampton.

## ii

The Watchkeep Street atmosphere was thick, anxious, and guarded. Both Oswald and his mother were curiously on the defence, as though they feared to fire his suspicions by saying too much.

Oswald did say, "Didn't you get my wire, Alban?"

"What wire?" asked Alban, as reticent as they. Oswald hesitated, wondering whether, the harm being done, he had better disclose the purpose of the wire. Mrs. Kent said, "Oswald wired you not to come home."

"You don't want me at home?" said Alban, evenly. He would give them their chance to be

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straight, anyhow. For a moment he thought his mother would be candid. She looked at him quickly, but what she saw checked her. She was powerfully aware that this was a new Alban, and she was a little frightened of him. He seemed leaner, bigger, stronger. He was calmer than of old, but it was the calmness of added power, not less. She felt that he could give to his fads, his ideas, his strange ways of looking at things a more concentrated force. In the old days there had been a wildness in him as well as in his ideas that made it not too difficult to defeat and fool him. But now she doubted whether she could do that. He had such a quiet, steady, undeviating air about him.

She said indignantly: "Don't talk such nonsense, Alban. As if I should ever deny a boy of mine his home. It wasn't that." She was herself wondering what it might be. She remembered Aunt Heppie. "We had arranged to give Aunt Heppie your room for a month."

"You've asked her?" he said, his eyes unpleasantly questioning.

"I can put her off," she retorted ambiguously.

"Or I could go into lodgings," he said grimly.

"Alban!" she cried, really affronted, really angry. She drove back at him in her way. "Is that what the country has taught you?" she said with resigned maternal bitterness.

"You seem to want me to stay longer and learn worse," he answered.

"I don't know what to make of you," she sighed.

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"To hear you talk you'd think I was your enemy instead of your own mother."

Alban said nothing. He wondered whether mothers weren't sometimes enemies. He felt her antagonism, but meaning to go slow, meaning, above all, to recognise that he was her son, he was hardened by her deception. He knew she was trying to deceive him with the mechanical determination of long habit.

He would have known it decisively if he had heard her speaking to Oswald about ten minutes later. She had told Alban she did not know what to make of him. She told Oswald: "He's worse than ever, Oswald. Going to that detestable Farm has simply hardened him. He's had time to brood over all those impossible ideas of his. I knew he would."

Oswald passed that. He had long ago realised that women, mother-women anyhow, had minds that worked in inexplicable and unreasonable mental processes. It was absolutely no good trying to cope with the clear, final falsehoods that issued from them as logic and fact. It was no good telling his mother, for instance, that she had been the one responsible for sending Alban to Moap's Farm.

All he answered was, "He seems soberer, steadier to me."

"He is," she cried. "That's the danger."

He shrugged his shoulders, he couldn't be expected to follow reasoning like that. Mrs. Kent went on with a wail: "He's going to be very dangerous, Oswald. He's become a fanatic. He's his

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father all over again—but different.” She didn’t dare say stronger. She said: “Not so reasonable. He’ll stop at nothing.”

“Well, then,” said Oswald, “what are we going to do?”

She cried: “Oh, what have I done to have such a son? What have I done?”

“Do you mean,” asked the puzzled Oswald, “Edwin or Alban?”

“Edwin, too,” she answered. “Edwin is behaving disgracefully. I’m shocked and pained at Edwin.”

“He is a rotten little beast,” said Oswald. “Alban was so far right there . . .”

“Oswald!” cried Mrs. Kent. “Are you taking sides against your own brother?”

“Oh, I don’t mean what Alban means. But the way Edwin is behaving towards that girl. . . . It’s blackguardly. I can’t understand why she allows it.”

“That,” said Mrs. Kent, suddenly prim, “is what I feel. No nice girl would demean herself by clinging to a man in such a fashion.”

“Hang it all,” said Oswald, in protest. “They *are* engaged. She has a right, you know.”

Mrs. Kent’s lips merely tightened, and she looked with the pity of a woman-wise mother at her innocent son.

### iii

“I don’t know whether I love you or hate you for coming,” said Rosamund, her long, slim, narrow-

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shinned figure sprawled as shamelessly as a boy's on the couch of the attic she called her studio.

Alban sat down, the back of the chair under his elbows: "What's wrong between Edwin and Gilda?" he asked evenly.

Rosamund, with an effort that sent her slim legs waving in the air, heaved herself upright. Her eyes narrowed, analysing Alban. "I've got you," she said. "I've been worrying since you came in to know where the new 'something' in you came from. You're Father—the big, horrible, cruelly accurate enlargement in Mother's room. Yes, you're Father, with your mouth and chin in better drawing. *His* mouth and chin rather explains Mother. I suppose it's Mother herself who's given you the extra. That's rather funny—ironic. . . . She's given Father, as it were, the things that will beat *her* in the end!"

"What's wrong between Edwin and Gilda?" said Alban, as evenly as before.

Rosamund looked at him, snuggled back: "The verdict is, I'm glad you came." Her keen, sharp, determinedly perverse little face abruptly softened into tragic lines. "Everything's wrong, I think, Alban. Edwin's practically finished with her."

Silence, Alban leaving Rosamund to speak.

She went on: "That's it, simply finished with her. Its gone out—poof! There was a time when there was something in her that held him. It's gone."

"Since he went down to Iamouth?"

She nodded: "That's when it went. That was

the finish. When he came back it, whatever it was, was wiped out. She was wiped out. Done with. Chucked!"

Again Alban waited.

"It was all over at once. There wasn't even a period of pretence. He went straight from her to this Mrs. Hogarth. He actually cut his holiday short to spend a couple of days with Mrs. Hogarth. I don't know whether she knows that, but it's a fact. And he spends every available minute with the damned woman."

She stared at Alban, who sat, brown, lean, immobile, watching her.

"Alban," she cried, "don't be so statuesque. Don't you understand what I am saying? He goes to Mrs. Hogarth. Never to Gilda. He has never set foot inside the Conroys' house since he came back from Iamouth."

"Certain of that?" asked Alban. His voice was so even that Rosamund threw a scared glance at him.

"Gilda told me herself—that's the state she has got into. She is not one of your cheap, confide-all sort. She says little enough now. But she's been driven as far as that." She waited for him to speak. He did not. She went on. "I guessed something was coming along even while Gilda was still at Iamouth. Not merely because Edwin went running after that woman, but because Gilda began writing to me. She'd dropped it, you know. But suddenly she started again, a long chatty letter which tried to disguise the fact that she wanted news of Edwin."

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“He hadn’t been writing?”

“I think not, but she said nothing. From the way he was occupying his time I should say he’d not sent her even a postcard.”

“When did Gilda begin writing again? Somewhere about—let me see—the 22nd of August?”

“Let me think. It was either after or before *The Sketch* bought that drawing . . . Yes, somewhere about the 22nd.”

Alban knew it. It must have been just after the time he had thrown Rosamund’s letter down to Gilda in the road, the letter she had searched for news of Edwin. And yet she had seemed so happy up to that, so settled in her love for Edwin—

“Go on,” he said.

“That first letter was a hinting letter. The ones that came after weren’t. She began to ask point-blank for news of Edwin . . . And it got rather frantic, Alban, because, you see, I had to hold her off a bit, thanks to the way Edwin was behaving. Then she came at me hard. Insisted on plain facts. Was Edwin seeing this Hogarth woman? Was he visiting her often? That sort of thing. It gave me cold shivers. I didn’t even know she knew about the Hogarth creature.”

“But you told her what she wanted?”

“Had to. It wasn’t any good lying, and I find lying hardish anyhow. I had to answer and it had to be the truth. Also I thought it best . . . What would you have done, Alban?”

“Exactly as you did, Rosamund. You and I can’t

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help ourselves . . . And then she came back here?"

"Yes, the next thing was that she was here. Startling! None of us expected her of course. Edwin didn't, either . . ."

"Ah, she saw him."

"Walked right in here on him. We had just finished tea. She—she was rather fine about it, you know, Alban. Reading between the lines of her letters, I said to myself as she came in, as I saw Edwin go sago-colour and redden, and then squint down at his hands in that way he has, 'Here's the hell of a scene.' But it was nothing like that. She came in as though it was the most ordinary thing in the world, as though she had just dropped in in passing, you know. She sat down among us and chatted about Iamouth as though nothing was the matter at all. It was rather fine, brave . . . When I think of her sick heart . . . You know, Alban, I don't think *I'd* have the guts to carry it off like that."

Alban looked at her, smiling a little. "Gilda's sort do not make scenes," he said. "Go on. What happened next?"

"Edwin slithered out of the house." Alban looked up with suddenly narrowed eyes. "Fact, Alban. He just did that. He walked out of the room—casually, as though he was going to get a box of matches, and he didn't come back. He just slimed right out of the house. We didn't know he

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was gone until half an hour later. Isn't he the prime hog?"

Alban's face was congested, the hands on the back of the chair were clenched. But he didn't speak, didn't care to speak. He nodded his head for Rosamund to go on.

"We all saw it of course, the whole room-full of us. Gilda stood up to go, and Mother, you bet it was Mother, said, 'Going, dear? Where's Edwin?' I thought I'd better look for Edwin, and the girl told me he'd gone out. I had to bring *that* back."

"And Mother?"

"Mother was *almost* ashamed that one of her boys should do such a thing."

"And Gilda?"

"Oh, Alban, I love Gilda," cried Rosamund, suddenly sniffing. "You'd have thought that it absolutely didn't matter at all, until you looked into her eyes." (Rosamund made a barefaced clutch for a wisp of a handkerchief and shamelessly used it.) "Her eyes, Alban, just tore me to little pieces," she said, explaining herself. "I didn't know anybody could be so—so tortured." She swung with abrupt ferocity on Alban. "You're swine, you men, swine. Why should a woman go through that for you? Why should a woman like Gilda love a hog like Edwin like that?"

Alban got up and walked stiffly to the big window looking out over the roofs of Earlhampton. He stared for a minute. Then:

"But she does," he said.

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There was a long silence behind him. A very long silence. Then out of it the voice of Rosamund, rising vaguely and with a queerly speculative intonation:

“Yes—I suppose she does.”

Alban turning, leaning against the window, answered the tone rather than the words: “Suppose?”

“Well, all the concrete facts indicate it,” she answered, speaking slowly as though reasoning with herself. “She, to put it crudely, won’t leave him alone, won’t give him up.”

“Explain that.”

“Well, he won’t go to see her, you know, so she comes round here. She comes round here nearly every day trying to see him. She’s not invited, in fact. As you’ll find the family is getting a little sniffy about it.”

“Damn them!” said Alban, thickly.

“Damn them!” said Rosamund. “She even tries to meet him outside, has once or twice, and I know she writes to him, here and at the works. She won’t let him go . . . So I suppose she’s in love with him. But it’s queer.”

He came and sat in front of her: “How—queer?” he demanded angrily.

“Well, that she—she should go on like that when he’s so obviously finished with her.”

“But they’re engaged. Edwin has no right to throw over the girl he is engaged to for a whim, without explanations . . .”

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"There have been explanations. She's seen him, I've told you, talked to him alone, twice . . ."

"Yes?" he demanded eagerly.

"The only result, as far as I can see, is that she cried herself silly for days, and Edwin went off for long visits to Mrs. Hogarth . . ."

"Nothing about breaking off the engagement?"

"Nothing at all—that's the strangeness of it."

"I don't think it's strange at all. If they are engaged . . ."

She stared at him callously, with the sharp candour of youth. "You do know it's queer, Alban," she said. "You know it's queer that a girl like Gilda should even want to hold a man when she knows he no longer loves her. Some girls might do it. Gilda's not that type. You and I know Gilda and we'd expect her to break it off—and she doesn't."

Alban said: "I know . . . That's true . . . But I don't understand these things very much. Perhaps she loves him too much."

"Will that do?" asked Rosamund. "My idea is that if she loved him as much as that, she'd willingly sacrifice herself, give him up."

"What else can be behind it then?" cried Alban, irritably. "She must have a reason for insisting that the engagement goes on?"

"I'm there too," she smiled wanly. "Just beating my head against a wall like you."

Alban said presently: "Well, then, do *you* think she really does love him?"

"Haven't I been trying to get at that all this

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time?" she said. "I don't know any more than you. I think she must, on facts, and on facts I sometimes think she doesn't. You know from some things she says I get an idea she detests him, hates him."

"Hates?"

"Of course, that's nothing to go by," she mused. "Hate's only a sort of by-product of love. But I don't know, from things she said, or the way she said them perhaps, I got the feeling that she knows him now for the dirty-minded little beast he is."

"What did she say?"

"In actual words? I don't know. Perhaps nothing definite. I said it was a sort of impression she gave me. It was as though she'd found him out."

"And yet still wants to marry him."

"It *is* absolutely mystifying."

"Doesn't she even talk straight to you, Rosamund? You're her most intimate friend. Surely she would talk to you."

"But you know she wouldn't," said Rosamund, smiling. "Not about things like that. She'll never wear her heart on her sleeve. I just pick up impressions, and can see the hell in her eyes. She'll fight this out alone."

"She oughtn't to, not against a rat like Edwin. And she won't. I'm going to see her."

"I wonder whether that will help. But it'll mean trouble. The family's already arrayed for a fight."

"The family? How do they all take it? Mother — Oswald . . . ?"

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"Watching neutrals, but already arming against the outside."

"My son and brother, right or wrong, I love thee still . . . ?"

"Yes, they're solid Edwin."

"And about the Hogarth woman? When I was at home last Oswald swore that he was putting his foot down in the matter of the Hogarth woman."

"I daresay it's still down. I know he's fumed at Edwin, but Edwin doesn't care. The powers of Kent Drugs no longer awe him. The Hogarth lady has an income of ten thousand a year, my boy."

"My God," said Alban, "the fellow makes me sick."

"Sick!" said Rosamund, in a sudden, shrewish voice. "I could kill him with my own hands—and enjoy it. And by the same token I can't understand for the life of me why Gilda is so keen to marry him."

"I can't understand it either. But I'll see her. Where's Edwin?"

"Brackenhurst," said Rosamund. "Where else?"

## *Chapter X*

### i

MRS. KENT had been watching Alban warily over the untiring industry of her knitting needles. She said immediately as he rose:

"Going out, Alban?"

"Yes," said Alban, who knew he had been watched.

"On your first evening home?" This in faintly hurt protest.

"Yes," said Alban.

Mrs. Kent, irritated and a little anxious, said tartly, "It must be somebody very important to drag you out on your first night."

Alban hesitated a minute on the lip of diplomacy and then decided his mother had better have the square truth.

"I'm going to call on the Conroys," he said.

"I should have thought you saw enough of them when they were at Iamouth," she said sharply.

"No more than usual," he answered evenly. And then he decided to let her have further truth. "As a matter of fact, I haven't been in touch with Gilda for seven or eight weeks."

"Gilda!" said Mrs. Kent, and her plump lips pinched inward. She looked at her knitting, and

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said gravely, softly, "I don't know that you ought to call on Gilda, Alban."

"Why not?" asked Alban, evenly.

"Must you always have a reason?" she asked sharply.

"I must in this case," he said. "Mr. Conroy and Gilda are very old friends, and I must know why you don't want me to call."

"Don't *want* you," cried Mrs. Kent. "What a strange tone you do adopt, Alban. I was not saying you should not call. Call by all means. I was only hinting that perhaps it would be more tactful not to."

"And even that doesn't give me a reason," said Alban, smiling. Really, his mother carried evasion to the height of art. "Why should I tactfully keep away? Had a tiff with old Conroy, Mother?"

"Don't be silly, Alban."

"Gilda and Edwin the reason, then?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Kent, tenderly, "that is the reason." She saw that for this exasperating son of hers this wasn't reason enough. She ended on a sigh. "There are difficulties there, Alban."

"Have they quarrelled, Mother?"

"Oh, no," cried Mrs. Kent, losing her diplomacy didn't realise that his persistence was unpleasant. "I don't think there has actually been a quarrel."

"Well, what then? They're still engaged, aren't they?" Alban was determined to force her hand.

"I don't know," said Mrs. Kent, trying not to be angry. "I really don't know anything about them. All I can say is that since their holidays at Iamouth

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there seems to have been a coldness between them. They see less of each other."

Alban said quite deliberately, "You mean Gilda is cold? Gilda refuses to see Edwin?"

"Oh no," cried Mrs. Kent, losing her diplomacy at the mere thought that any girl would dare to cold-shoulder a son of hers. "Oh, no, quite the other way about. It is Edwin who seems to have changed. She is willing enough to see Edwin; far too willing—coming round here at all times, whether she is asked or not."

"So," said Alban, incisively, "the fault is Edwin's."

Mrs. Kent realised that she had been out-generalled; also that a son of hers was being held up in a bad light.

"Why *must* you always see faults in your brother?" she demanded. "I don't know anything, mind you, but I think—that is, it isn't unlikely that these young people have come to realise—well, that they're not exactly suited. We've always had a little doubt. You yourself had those doubts too, Alban, as to whether it was an ideal match. Well, perhaps they are realising it isn't. I say nothing; I know nothing, mind you, but it seems to me that perhaps that is what is happening. If so, surely it is not a fault—it's wisdom, really."

"Does Gilda feel like this, do you think, Mother?"

"Gilda!" she cried angrily. Then more diplomatically: "I don't know anything about Gilda. I confess I don't understand these modern girls at all."

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"Does that mean that Gilda does not think like this at all? That she is still of the old opinion about the engagement, that it is Edwin alone who wants to get out of it?"

"You make use of hateful expressions," cried Mrs. Kent. "I don't know whether Edwin wants the engagement ended or not. Why you shouldn't support your own brother in something you yourself feel to be the wisest thing, I can't understand."

"Because they're still engaged. If that is so, then it is for Gilda to say whether it is or is not for the best, whether things are to go on or stop."

"Oh, Gilda!" she rapped out again in scorn. "You can be sure that Gilda will not want a change."

"What makes you say that?"

"You act," cried Mrs. Kent, trying to stamp down her anger, "as though Gilda was more important than your own brother."

"But isn't she in this?" asked Alban. "I mean not Gilda herself, but the principle she represents. It is for the girl to say whether the engagement is to end or not."

"That may be true enough in many cases. But here—" Mrs. Kent's feelings were uncontrollable—"I don't know. Modern girls seem to have no decency, no pride."

"You're saying again that Gilda has some motive for keeping Edwin to his word. What do you mean?"

"I won't have you talk to me like that," snapped the really angry Mrs. Kent.

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"I'm only trying to find out," said Alban. "Twice you've spoken unpleasantly of Gilda. There must be a reason."

"Reason!" cried Mrs. Kent. "Haven't I reason for being unpleasant? When a girl comes round here hunting the boy, positively hunting him? She has no shame. She won't leave him alone . . . She waylays him in the street even. It's revolting."

"Isn't it because he won't go round to see her?"

"That makes it worse," she cried. "Infinitely worse. Where's her pride? If a young man showed *me* that he had changed his mind, that he was tired of me, I should know how to act. *I* should not demean myself by running after him. If he wanted to go I should let him go. But then we had some pride, some sense of decency in the old days."

If she had left it at that, she might have at least silenced Alban with the power of her reasoning. He, too, was puzzled at Gilda's attitude. It was because he was puzzled that he was silent. His mother thought it was because he was hostile. It made her more angry.

"But, then, I suppose," she reflected, "I was a girl who thought more of my self-respect, of real love than of a fine position as the wife of a partner in Kent Drugs."

"Mother!" cried Alban, shocked and disgusted.

"Some girls," continued his uncheckable mother, "will put up with anything for the sake of a good catch. They have no shame. A rich husband is much more to the point than self-respect."

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She stopped, because the stare from Alban's eyes, the disgust in them, overcame even her anger for the moment. She glared back at him trying to maintain her outraged attitude.

Alban said slowly, "I never dreamt you were capable of anything so beastly, Mother."

"How dare you talk like that to me?" she cried. "Has this girl bewitched you too, so that you hate your own mother?"

He moved towards the door. "That," he said, "is beastly too. I'm only trying to get at the bottom of this bad business, and you . . ."

"*You* get to the bottom of it," she cried. "Why should you?" He shrugged his shoulders. "How can you? You've got such ridiculous ideas, that you can't see or listen to plain reason. You don't want to listen to reason. You don't believe me. Well, will you explain this girl's attitude to me in some other way? Edwin is obviously not wanting to marry her. He shows her plainly in every way what his feelings are. He won't call on her, he won't see her at all, he won't write to her. He goes off instead to another woman . . . I don't like this Mrs. Hogarth, but there she is, and Edwin most pointedly neglects Gilda Conroy to go to her. All this, in addition to the fact that they are really not suited to each other. And yet, though Edwin has made his feelings plain, does the girl break off the engagement as any decent girl with a scrap of pride would? She doesn't. She won't give him up; she won't leave him alone; she pesters him; she hunts him. And why?

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Because she does not intend to give up a man of Edwin's money and position."

Said Alban sharply: "You mustn't say that. Gilda is not that sort of girl. I'm certain she is not that sort of girl."

Mrs. Kent's eyes for a moment held that glare with which she said, as she sometimes did of an impossible person, "And I could have boxed his ears then and there!" She looked ready to box Alban's ears then and there. But suddenly she grew more frigidly, more powerfully calm.

"It is very nice of you to think that, Alban," she said. "It shows your fine feelings. But if she isn't that sort of girl, what sort of girl is she?"

Alban was silent.

She went on: "I don't want to be harsh. In many ways I like Gilda. I should have valued her as a daughter-in-law. But one must be just. What other explanation is there for her attitude? Could, for instance, any girl who really loved a man want to keep him against his will?"

Again Alban was silent. The mysteries of Gilda and love baffled him.

"I see you feel as I do," said Mrs. Kent, triumphantly. "If I felt that Gilda really loved Edwin . . ." But she saw that that would lead to dangerous places. She tried again: "It is because I know that it isn't really a matter of love . . . I feel that there is another reason. . . . My dear boy, it is sweet of you to be chivalrous, but the world, you know, is rather more material than you think. And

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one gets shocks about even the people one likes.” She beamed softly on him; she thought that she was winning him with gentle, worldly-wise wisdom. And he said immediately:

“All the same, I am confident that that isn’t Gilda’s reason. She’s not that type at all.”

“Then, in Heaven’s name, what is the reason?” asked Mrs. Kent.

“I don’t know,” he said frowning. “I don’t know. Perhaps having been engaged to him she can’t bear to give him up.”

“Isn’t that what I have been saying?” retorted his mother.

“No,” he said. He looked at his mother anxiously, saw that he could never explain to her exactly what he meant, and broke away. “No,” he repeated, “we don’t mean the same things. All I want to say is that if Gilda holds to her engagement with Edwin, Edwin is in honour bound to go on with it, and we are in honour bound to support her.”

Mrs. Kent made a troubled, hopeless gesture. She said: “I’m afraid we shall never get anywhere. We had better leave things to work themselves out in their own way.”

ii

Mr. Conroy was out, and Alban waited in the little, vaguely beautiful sitting-room.

That room, always so contented and charming to him in its wistful and tenuous comeliness, now seemed to be chilly with dejection. At first he

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thought this was his own fault, that his mood was reading a false quality into the chamber. Gradually he began to perceive that the emotion arose from the room itself. It was untidy. It was dusty. It had a mournful air of neglect. A delicate lampshade was torn and it let out a bleak and revealing light. The room spoke of a mind no longer happy and smooth-working. Gilda's mind, of course, since under her fingers the peculiar charm of this room had grown and had always been sustained.

Alban read into it her misery. But he saw another thing that troubled him. There had been, he remembered, at least four photographs of Edwin in this room. A large head and shoulders in a silver frame had stood conspicuously on a little bookcase. The others had been scattered about, but all well in the eye. There were none visible now. He found a rim clear of dust where the large silver frame had stood on the bookcase—the dust itself a significance; the photo, the other photos were gone. There was no hint of Edwin in the room.

That was rather extraordinary, rather perplexing. The room told plainly how upset Gilda was in regard to Edwin, and yet she had removed his portraits. That was a contradiction he could not understand.

Gilda entered the room hurriedly, her breath coming shallowly, quickly, in excitement. She stopped dead at the sight of him, and moaned a little.

He was shocked at that moan. He was acutely concerned at her appearance. He had never seen her quite so pale, he thought, and there were dark

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finger smudges under her eyes, while the lids seemed red.

"She's been crying and crying." He thought, "What a damn brute the fellow is."

But the change in her wasn't really that alone. She looked pinched, the nostrils especially looked pinched, and that gave her an air of being more than miserable—of being frightened.

She was that, and disappointed almost to tears. She faltered before him: "Oh, you, Alban. The girl said *Mr. Kent*, and I thought—"

Alban knew what she had thought. She had thought it was Edwin. As she moved, a little listlessly, into the light, he saw that she had powdered with the anxious haste of one unaccustomed to it, that she had even touched up her lips. He was heartsick at the sight. He saw in it her pitiable effort to appear at her best before the man who was losing interest in her charms.

She saw that he noted these things, for she flushed and her fingers slipped to the bosom of her dress for her handkerchief. Then, with a steadier look at him, she pulled it out and vigorously rubbed powder and lip-stick away.

"I oughtn't to have done that," she said. "I did it without thinking—or from too much thinking. I thought you were Edwin."

He saw at once that she had made up her mind to say something about Edwin. He met her more than half-way. "I know," he said, "I understand Edwin doesn't come round often."

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She stood rigid, watching him mutely. He saw that as she listened her lips were forming one after another the very words he was uttering, as though not a syllable must escape. When he had finished, she put her hand on his arm, and drew him towards an ingle-nook.

"Come and sit down," she said. "It's so easy to talk after all. I was stupid to be afraid."

"Not afraid of me, Gilda?" he said astonished.

"Oh, but *you* particularly," she said, then quickly: "No, of everybody. I can't bear myself or anybody these days, Alban." She deliberately selected a corner well in the shadow.

"Now we'll talk," she said, "Oh, Alban, you're rather a comforting feeling, you know."

"That's what I want to be. And we'll talk about what you like—but I think it ought to be about you and Edwin."

"Yes," she said, and was for a long time silent. Then unexpectedly. "Am I changed, Alban?"

"Changed? No. Why changed?"

"Not a bit? Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. You're the same as ever. Why should you change in seven or eight weeks?"

"Don't I look jaded, haggard, as though I—as though something—as though I was worrying?" She was confused, anxious, fearful.

"Oh, that," he smiled. "Well, a little washed out, fagged out, I should say."

"Is that all?" Curious how she insisted. "That's all the difference you see?"

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"It isn't even a difference," he said. "It's merely that you are a little tired, a little pinched."

"Pinched!" she cried, and she was sitting bolt upright, and he saw terror in the eyes that looked wildly into his. "You see *that?*"

He couldn't understand her at all. Or rather he felt that this Edwin business had affected her more deeply than anyone imagined. She was so nervous, so jumpy, so easily thrown off her balance.

"You see *that?*" she cried again. "You see I'm pinched?"

"That's just a term, Gilda. I meant I can see you have been upset and are worrying."

"But you mean more than that—pinched! Of course you mean more than that. Tell me frankly, Alban."

"No, I don't," he said, wondering why she should be so upset at so silly a word. "It was just an expression that came to me. I would have said 'wan' or 'seedy' if either had come to me first."

She watched his face carefully as he spoke, seeking something in it beyond words. She sank back into the shadow again, and remained so silent that he himself had to say in the end, "Perhaps you don't care to talk about Edwin."

"What are they saying about me and Edwin?" she asked.

"If you mean the family," said Alban, going slowly, "they think there is something wrong between you."

"They are saying he is tired of me?"

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"They think there is an estrangement."

"But they feel it is all on Edwin's side—that he is the one who is backing out."

"They feel . . ."

"The truth, please, Alban. Don't be afraid. I'm not unaware of things."

"Yes, they feel that Edwin has changed."

"No," she said with so sudden an anger that he was startled. "No, he hasn't changed. He's as he always was—even I can see that *now*."

Alban was silent.

"And they are saying that I'm pursuing him, won't leave him alone, aren't they? It's I who won't let him go . . . All right, you needn't answer, I see it in your face, Alban. And I suppose it's true." Her hands caught together convulsively. "It's horrible. I hate myself . . . But they don't *know*, they don't understand . . ." Her voice was nervously intense almost to the point of breaking.

Alban said slowly to help her, "My opinion is that you have reached a stage when you could not bear to give him up."

Her hands clasped tighter, she seemed unable to answer.

"You see, you've been engaged so long that it is hard to give him up, that's how I look at it," said Alban, lamely. He wished she would speak.

"You're on my side, Alban?" she demanded suddenly.

He weighed his answer. "Yes, Gilda, if you wish to keep Edwin to his promise, I'm on your side."

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"And—and you don't ask questions?"

"That isn't necessary, Gilda," he said. "It seems to me that this is a matter in which the girl—you—decide. Unless you break off with Edwin I hold that he is in honour bound to carry out the engagement."

"Yes," she said fiercely. "We are engaged. He can't alter that. He is bound by honour."

"On the other hand," said Alban, slowly, "there's his side, you know, Gilda."

"His side?" she cried indignantly. "He has no side at all. He *must* keep his promise to marry me."

Taken aback by the unexpected fierceness of her uncompromising tone, Alban tried to read her face in the shadow. He could learn nothing from it. He said: "I have no right to interfere, of course, I shouldn't have gone as far as this, I have no real standing in this affair. But—"

"But you *will* take my side against them all," she said. "I know you will. That's why I am talking to you, Alban. I haven't talked like this to anybody . . . Not Rosamund . . . Not my father even . . . But you—you're an old friend, and I know how straight and fair you are. And you're his brother . . . Oh, how wild I sound, but I'm in a corner, Alban, dear, and I must have help. Must!"

He did not know whether she was crying, or on the verge of crying. He did realise how deeply, how profoundly she was upset. He said as gently as he could: "I am on your side, of course, for the little good I can do. It is because I am, that I want to

say that there is another way of looking at things. If you and Edwin don't hit it off before marriage, how can you expect . . . ?"

She gave a little cry so close to hysteria that he stopped dead. She put out her hand and clutched his arm feverishly. He could feel the heat of her palm through his coat sleeve. "Don't say it," she cried in a strangled voice. "Don't say it. Leave all *that* alone."

"But it is a thing that must be considered."

"Don't say it," she cried again. "Don't say it. Haven't I thought that out? Haven't I? . . . Well . . . Don't bring it up . . . You mustn't bring it up . . . I won't listen. I can't!"

She snatched her hand away, crouched back in the shadow. He could see the quick, jerky lift of her breasts, and the shine of her eyes. She was panting, glaring at him, like some wild thing at bay.

"All right," he said, "if you have made up your mind, Gilda . . . ?"

"It is absolutely made up," she said thickly.

He nodded. He didn't understand, but he recognised that she alone decided.

"You can count on me to do all I can," he said. "It won't be much, but I'll do it. I'll try and make the family, Edwin, see the straight thing to do."

"Make him keep his promise, that is all I ask," she said. Her hands gripped the cushions of the seat. "His promise to me was that he would marry me in December, and I want him to keep it."

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"In December," cried Alban. "That's early. I hadn't heard of that."

"In December, before the New Year, anyhow," she said quickly, as though to cover up too great an eagerness. "That was what we settled when we last discussed things." She was recovering, speaking more fluently, too fluently perhaps for one rather reticent about such things. Something in her insisted on lulling him with copious explanations. "You see, we'd agreed and I've made all my arrangements. Fixed up things ahead, given—given orders ahead. You see what that means to a girl, don't you, Alban? She's silly, perhaps, but she feels so ashamed at—at having to counterman such things, to see the looks on faces as she does it . . . . Perhaps you can't understand, but it's awful."

Alban could understand. He could understand it in another girl, but it was unexpected in Gilda. He had felt her rather bigger than such trifles. He could have sworn that *she* would have triumphed over such petty things with her usual high courage. A little disturbing to find that, after all, she was a sister to ordinary girls.

Under this unexpectedness he could only ask, "Did mother know that the wedding was to be so soon?"

"I don't know what your mother knew," she said. "I don't know what Edwin told her. But that is what we arranged. And I took it for granted—and I want it to be as we arranged." Suddenly she realised that there was a certain uselessness in all this. "Oh,

I oughtn't to be talking like this to you, Alban. I oughtn't to need to. I should be talking to Edwin. But he won't come near me. He won't give me a chance. He avoids me. Avoids me!" She stood up. "If he'd only come to me like a man, and talk it out . . . But he doesn't. He won't!"

"There," said Alban, also standing, "is where there will be difficulties, Gilda. If Edwin won't talk with you, won't agree . . ."

He saw that she was calm, determined, almost cruel. "He will have to agree, Alban," she said harshly. "I will make him marry me."

"My dear girl, you can't do that, you know," cried Alban.

"I will *make* him marry me," she said implacably.

"Be sensible, my dear girl. To talk of making him marry you, will only—"

"I will make him marry me. Tell him that, Alban. I mean what I say." Her tone was ruthless, so ruthless that Alban had the feeling that he was meeting for the first time an utterly new woman. Or was it the real, inner woman, the woman his mother saw, emerging? He said almost coldly: "You can't make him marry you if he won't, Gilda. Even the law . . ."

"I'll go even to law, if necessary," she said fiercely.

## iii

"That," said Rosamund, looking rather like an outlandish doll in her Chinese dressing-wrap, "that's

sheer bluff, a threat to scare the fellow into doing the right thing."

"I don't know," said Alban, hunched up on his bed. I never saw her like that before. "She's a different girl to the one I thought I knew."

"She sounds more desperate than different," said Rosamund, musing. "But, anyhow, it was bluff. Gilda and breach-of-promise don't go together. Bluff! But you must try it out on Edwin, Oswald, Mother and Co. It's the sort of thing to which their temperaments will react most powerfully."

Alban, however, was busy adjusting this business of temperaments. He was in an unpleasant state of mind. Gilda's final attitude had been so great a shock that he was wondering whether, after all, his mother's outlook had not been more accurate than his own or Rosamund's.

Gilda's attitude had been a revelation, he thought, of her real self—the self that her beauty and charm had hidden from his eyes. He did not like to think this, but what else was he to think? That exposure of herself had given the only practical explanation of an attitude otherwise inexplicable. Love, desire, affinity could not explain her determination to marry Edwin. Only a determination not to relinquish so good a match fitted in with her harsh decision to hold the fellow by threat of the law if necessary.

It was a complete, a shocking reversal of all his worshipping thoughts of her, and yet he had to be just. Hateful though it was, it fitted. He felt that his mother had really seen the truth with eyes not

blinded by the prejudice of chivalry (as she had called it), which had obscured his own outlook.

He was miserable and in pain, but his instinctive desire for the straightness, the decency, the truth of anything made him see that his mother's attitude was probably right.

Rosamund, who had crept into his room on his return—a late return, for he had tramped the streets with his thoughts—was also thinking out the brief summary he had given her of his visit to Gilda. Curled up in his chair and in spite of her barbaric wrap, she had an air of thinking sharply and deeply on a matter that was obviously puzzling. She screwed her small, clean-cut mouth sideways as though something rather unpleasant had occurred to her. She shot a wary look at her brother, and then a glance more full, as though he, for the moment, was more interesting.

“Don’t fly off the handle, Alban,” she said. “Don’t be in such a hurry with your final judgments.”

She was obviously reading his thoughts. He recognised it. He said: “Well, Mother’s explanation—it fits logically, doesn’t it?”

“Rats,” said Rosamund, scornfully. She settled deeper into his easy chair, dragging whitey-pink shins out of sight under the gauze of her ridiculous night-gown. “I know what you’re thinking,” she said scoffingly. “The unerring feminine eye of Mother has penetrated coldly to the truth. Well, I’ve got an unerring feminine eye, too; it’s no less

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cold, and it is—though I say it—rather keener for the stark truth than Mother's. And that isn't the truth I see. To say that Gilda is holding Edwin on mercenary grounds is simply out of drawing, out of character."

"Then why is she holding him, Rosamund?"

"We don't get that answer so easily," she said. "It's a queer business, but I know the money-grabbing, social-position theory won't wash. If Gilda wanted a Kent husband, she'd . . ." She looked a little impertinently at Alban, her slim, fine pipe of a throat bubbled with a suppressed giggle, and said aloofly: "But we don't want mere speculation. Let's have facts. Let's have a full report of your visit from your first ring at the door-bell, Alban."

Alban began to go over his visit. He had got as far as Gilda's entrance when he said: "Oh, there was one strange thing. All Edwin's photos had been taken out of the sitting-room."

"Ah," said Rosamund, keenly. "We'll go back on this. We're forgetting that rooms tell secrets. Those photos were gone. Anything else?"

Alban described the queer impression he had had of that sitting-room, its untidiness and dejection. Rosamund nodded at each point. She, too, realised the room wasn't like the old Gilda. When he had finished with the room, he paused, and Rosamund said, "Go on." He described Gilda's entrance again. Her first words. "Half a minute," said Rosamund. "What was she like? What was she looking like?"

Alban spoke of the powder and lip-stick. And

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from that he went on to Gilda's strange anxiety about her looks, the way she had asked him if she had changed, her queer fear at the simple word "pinched." "You can see how she has suffered. How pitifully she is afraid that her suffering has spoilt her looks, and that she will not be able to hold Edwin with them."

"It was that which worried her—her being pinched?" said Rosamund in a curious voice. She was looking at him with eyes queerly wide and dark. Alban was surprised and irritated by her. How idiotically women were obsessed by trivial details. Here was Rosamund also forgetting the big issue just to dwell on the word "pinched."

She insisted upon it, though he was impatient to get on with the major points of his conversation. She wanted to know if "pinched" really did describe Gilda's looks. Was she pinched about the nostrils? Alban agreed she was, and that pinched did actually describe her better than the other words he had told Gilda might have occurred to him first. "Did her eyes look queer?" was another one of Rosamund's childish questions.

"Yes, her eyes did look rather queerish," Alban said, but they would, she'd been crying a lot. Yes, she was very pale, too. No, he had noted nothing about her figure. No, he didn't think she looked stouter, fuller . . . No, not even up there. (Rosamund had indicated her own tiny dryad breasts.) "Where does all this lead us?" he snapped irritably. "We're trying to find out what she is feel-

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ing, not how she is looking . . . What's the idea?"

"All right," she said in a toneless voice. "Go ahead, Alban." And he went on, right on to the end without another interruption, even though he insisted and emphasised the harsh and mercenary tone Gilda had employed when she demanded an early marriage and threatened Edwin with the law.

"And I don't see how else we can look at things after that," he had said with a touch of despair. He glanced at Rosamund and became angry. His sister was definitely not paying attention to him, was off on a train of thought of her own.

"You see," he snapped again, "Mother's idea is the only one that squares with facts."

Rosamund uncurled her thin legs and stood up. Her eyes came back to reality and fixed his with a curious passion: "You'll have to fight hard for Gilda," she said. "You've just got to make them do what she wants."

He was staggered: "Good Lord," he gasped, "and I've just been saying . . ."

"I know," she said. "But it's not true. I don't think it's true . . . I wish I thought it was. But you mustn't let her down, Alban. Never!"

"You mean you see why she wants to marry him?"

"I don't know. Yes, perhaps I do . . . But leave it at that, Alban. Don't bother about that part, only fight. You must fight. You must never give in. Edwin must keep his promise to her."

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### iv

An inexplicable feminine attitude. The more Alban thought of Rosamund's sudden, set, Sphinx-like certainty, the more baffled he became. He could see no cause for his sister, and his kid sister at that, suddenly recognising that Gilda's attitude was entirely right and also entirely unmercenary. He went back over the whole of their talk, of his talk with Gilda, and he could find no single item that could have crystallized her doubts into a final, indestructible, feminine conviction. He felt he was incapable of understanding the secret workings of the female mind or the superb, sure illogic that arose from those workings.

For Rosamund was rooted in the certainty of her rightness. She visited Gilda next day. When she came back she was rather over-cheerful with the family, rather grave in her attic-study. She seemed more anxious to concentrate on a black-and-white drawing than to talk about Gilda.

She said that Gilda had nothing at all to say. Nothing! She herself had nothing to report. Nothing! Alban felt this was a very poor return for his very detailed confidence. He pressed her. In the middle of it she cried: "Oh, shut up, Alban. Don't you see—can't you see I want to think? And alone. Go down stairs and stir up Mother. And Oswald."

"About Gilda?"

She almost withered him: "Who else, you mutt?

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Didn't I say yesterday we've got to make a devil of a fight for Gilda? Don't forget it for a minute."

### V

Mrs. Kent refused to be stirred up. She refused to talk about Gilda. Pressed, cornered, she said imperiously: "I see no good in discussing this, Alban. It is sad, very sad, but I see no good in going over it again and again. We must let it alone and allow the young people to work out their destiny in their own way."

"But Edwin is determined to . . . ."

"That will do, Alban," said his mother, firmly. "We will not go any further."

Even when goaded, Mrs. Kent would not go any further. Abruptly, brazenly, Rosamund said after dinner, "I saw Gilda to-day, Mother."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Kent, soothingly. "Did you go by way of Estuary Bank? The water must have looked particularly beautiful to-day, must have satisfied the artist in you."

"It wasn't the artist that went to Gilda's," said Rosamund. "It was just the human in me. I want to talk to you about Gilda, Mother."

Mrs. Kent put down her inevitable jumper.

"And I will not talk about Gilda, Rosamund."

"You must, Mother."

Mrs. Kent looked at her coldly.

"I think you heard what I said, Rosamund."

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"But you must, Mother. We can't let things go on like this."

"That will do, Rosamund. I decide whether I talk of these things or not. My children don't do it for me yet."

"But you can't turn your back on it like this. You've got to face it, not funk it."

"You had better go to your room," said Mrs. Kent, severely.

"I am not going to my room," said Rosamund, with forced calm. "Edwin is behaving like a beast to Gilda, and we've got a right to object."

"Very well," said Mrs. Kent, rising with frigid dignity, "if you will not leave the room, I shall."

"That's running away, that's cowardly . . ."

Oswald came in with his heavy metal: "None of that now, Rosamund. You have heard what your mother said. Go out of the room at once."

"Rosamund is right," said Alban, as quietly as he could. "This matter of Edwin and Gilda has gone too far. It concerns us all. We . . ."

"Shut up, Alban," snapped Oswald, out of patience. "We've had all we want of that from you."

Mrs. Kent suddenly and terribly swung on him. "Yes, quite enough," she cried in white, hot anger. "Be careful, Alban, it is getting to a point where I, your own mother, will not stand it any longer. It is unendurable. Every time you come home there is trouble, disturbance. Always you—always you. Never one of my other children, always you who up-

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set things, who make bad blood, who set sister against brother . . . ?”

“If you mean me—”, began Rosamund.

“I mean you. You’re only a foolish, empty-headed little echo of Alban’s impossible fads and ideas. Well, I am not going to stand it much longer. I *will* not stand it. I am mistress in my own house. I will remain mistress, I will not have this defiance, this wilful annoyance, this—this deliberate making of bad blood. It will have to be ended—or I shall end it. Understand that. I put my foot down this time. You can obey—or you can take the consequences.”

She was staring at Alban, her face white and fierce, her eyes shining with anger, her look full of menace. Alban, dumbfounded at the intensity of her passion against him, himself furious at the cruel illogic of it, said evenly: “I am sorry, Mother, you take it this way. It is only because you won’t see what we—I am driving at . . . .”

“We won’t see,” she cried. “Have you ever said anything but that? Have you ever asked yourself why it is that it’s always ‘we’ who won’t see, never *you* who won’t? You never do. You have always set yourself against us. You have always been perverse, deliberately, obstinately, cruelly perverse. From your very boyhood you have been a trial and trouble and sorrow to us. None of the others are like you. *You* only demand the sacrifice of all of us for you. Well, I will see they are not sacrificed. I give you full warning that I, that Oswald and I, have

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about reached the limits of our patience. Go on like this and we will know how to deal with you."

She swept towards the door. At the door: "I have never been so insulted in my life—and by my own children, too." She went out.

"There," said Rosamund, in a cutting and contemptuous voice, "goes all the feminine logic of the Victorian age. Plenty of passion, but never an argument."

"Rosamund," snarled Oswald, "get out of this room at once."

"Oswald," said Rosamund in a low fierce voice, "I am *not* going to get out of this room. And what are *you* going to do about it?"

They stood glaring at each other like animals about to come to grips. For an instant it seemed as though her eldest brother would put her out bodily. "Try it, Oswald," she cried with a passionate exultance. "Try to do it! You don't know how I'm longing to scratch and tear and bite and kick. . . . Try!"

Oswald made a heavy gesture of disgust and moved to the door.

"This doesn't end it, Oswald," said Alban, quietly. "This thing has got to be hammered out."

Oswald made a heavier gesture of disgust and left the room.

Edwin came back from Brackenhurst two days later. He came in the full of the forenoon, and he came straight to the Factory. Alban saw him slip-

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ping with a sort of jaunty furtiveness through the clerks' office to Oswald's door. He himself followed him into Oswald's office.

Both brothers looked up, Edwin with his pert and wary sneer, Oswald with a real flash of temper.

"What do you want, Alban?" Oswald said at once. "I am speaking to Edwin. Come back later."

"I want to speak to Edwin," said Alban.

"Look here," snapped Oswald, "I'm going to have none of this, Alban. I won't have you interfering. Go out."

"Somebody must interfere," said Alban. "Since you won't, I must." He stood firmly with his back to the door.

"Do you hear?" stormed Oswald. "I will not have this. It is none of your business. You have no right to come into it."

"It's your business, I'll admit," said Alban, "but you do nothing. Something must be done. If you don't do it, I shall."

Oswald, never powerful in an extempore situation, glared at Alban, glanced at Edwin, who, sitting back in too conscious ease, his smile artificial in its set impertinence, saw that he must speak. He said insolently: "Let us get it over then. I take it that, as usual, Alban is championing the lady of his particular regard, Gilda Conroy."

Oswald was silent. Alban walked to the desk. He said thickly: "Before we go any further, you'd better understand, Edwin, that if you adopt that tone about Gilda, I intend to give you the worst mauling

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a man ever had.” He stared long and coldly at the grin that, undiminished, took on a sickly and furtive colour. “You recognize I mean it, I see. Now what do you intend to do with regard to your engagement to Gilda?”

“That,” sneered Edwin, “is entirely my business.”

“I’ll have an answer. What do you intend to do about that engagement?”

“I’ve answered. I do not intend to discuss my own business with you.”

“And I agree,” growled Oswald. “It is not your business, Alban.”

“I have made it my business,” said Alban. “And I want an answer. You are engaged to this girl, you are bound by your promises. They’re sacred. You have agreed to marry her in December. You must keep your word.”

“In December, by Jove,” sneered Edwin. “That’s quick. That’s news.”

“You needn’t lie,” said Alban. “I know you promised that the wedding should be in December.”

“You seem strangely well informed, I must say.” Edwin’s tone had a wealth of meaning. Alban’s eyes glowered at him, and the long chin set stiffly. Edwin shrank back. Alban, determined not to spoil things by bad temper, said evenly: “I know. You have made your promises, you must keep them.”

“Going to force me to keep them—physically, eh?” jeered Edwin, with bared teeth.

“Not necessarily. I am simply suggesting that as a man of honour you should keep your word.”

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“And if I don’t keep my word?” The question was insolent, but it was also wary.

“I can’t conceive of you being such an abominable cur.”

“Look here, we’ll have no words like that,” bleated Oswald.

“Can you think of a better for a man who deliberately engages himself to a girl, deliberately captures her affections, definitely promises to marry her, and gives a day for it, and then goes back on every sacred bond? Can you think of any term more suitable?”

“*Her* affections,” jeered Edwin, and Alban’s hand shot out and caught his wrist. The hand twisted the arm back with immense strength, and real fear came into Edwin’s eyes, yet he seemed incapable of movement. It was Oswald who shouted, “Stop that, do you hear—” and the noise of his chair rasping back as he leaped up brought Alban back to his senses. Alban’s hand came back and lay on the desk clenched hard. He was fighting down an anger that might spoil things for Gilda.

“If you can’t keep yourself in hand, out of the office you go,” cried Oswald, impotently.

Alban ignored Oswald. Edwin sidled his chair out of arm’s reach.

“That sort of bullying won’t do anything,” he said impudently. “And all this big talk about curs and honour and so forth may be fine, but what does it mean? I’m a cur, you say. Why? Because I’ve realised what you’ve already pointed out several

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times, my superior fellow; that is, that a marriage between me and Gilda would be a ruddy failure."

"It *is* what you yourself have argued," said Oswald with an air of age-old wisdom.

"That won't do now," said Alban, quietly. "Gilda has gone too far—"

"Too far," cried Edwin, whipping a weasel-like glance at him. "What the devil do you mean?"

"I mean, in the beginning the engagement could have been broken off without hurt to Gilda. Not now. It is for her to decide now."

"Oh, is it?" said Edwin, viciously. "I've no word in the ruining of my life, I suppose?"

"No! Not as an honourable man. If Gilda does not release you. . . ."

Edwin said with a wicked snarl: "Don't jaw like a damned, psalm-smiting prig. You talk like a fool. If you don't know life and facts, I'll put 'em plainly before you. I've put 'em plainly enough before *her*. I'm not going to muck up *my* life for a mistake. I'm not going to be tied hand and foot to misery all my life because of a sentimental idea. Hear that? I don't intend to make my life a hell—or hers for the matter of that, just because of a moment of mid-summer craziness. I've told her that, *straight*. If she won't listen, it's not my fault. But she knows. I've got no more to say. I've finished with the whole damn bag of tricks, see."

"You mean you've told her you wanted the engagement broken?" cried Oswald.

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"More than once," said Edwin, sullenly. "I'm sick of it."

"And—and she refuses to release you."

"That's the idea."

"It's utterly unreasonable," cried Oswald, almost gobbling in his indignation. "It's—it's monstrous."

"It's for her to say," said Alban. "Whatever you may think about it, it is for her to decide."

"Her!" fumed Oswald. "For her to decide, for a sentimental, stupid girl—a designing girl to decide. . . . ." The cold glare in Alban's eyes halted him. He waved an angry hand. "You're talking arrant rubbish, Alban."

"You'll find that the law doesn't think so," said Alban.

Edwin laughed abruptly and sharply. Oswald stiffened as though struck. "The law!" he said, and he packed all the Kent fear of scandal into the word. "The law? What are you talking about? The law?"

"The law of breach-of-promise is pretty plain," said Alban.

"Good God!" gasped Oswald, "she wouldn't dream of such a thing."

"It's the only way to deal with blackguards like Edwin," said Alban, without heat.

Again Edwin laughed shortly.

"A blackguard, eh?" he jeered. "Well, what about yourself? Where does all this interest in Gilda spring from? From a quite honourable regard,

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eh? How do *you* know she's going to law, eh?  
A pretty intimate confidence that?"

Alban instinctively defended Gilda from this brute: "No confidence," he said. "I shall advise her to go to law."

"You," shouted Oswald. "You'll act against your own flesh and blood?"

"I mean to," said Alban, "unless Edwin keeps his promise."

"A pretty kind of brother, isn't he?" sneered Edwin.

Alban stood rigid. Oswald, breathing hard, feeling a final and unappeasable hate against Alban, stood rigid. Edwin, pert, sneering, sly, looked from one to the other. His grin deepened:

"All right," he said. "I'll see Gilda. I'll put it straight with her."

He went with a mean little swagger out of the room, his brothers not moving.

## *Chapter XI*

### i

THE atmosphere at the Kent house was like an armed camp that night.

Mrs. Kent sat at the carving end of the table, implacable, rigid. It was obvious that Oswald had told her of the scene at the office, of Alban's threat to invoke the law. It was obvious what the effect had been on her. It had produced in her an anger that lifted her above acting. Her usual airs, the air of a harassed mother bearing insupportable burdens, the air of a woman trying to maintain her natural sweetness despite the slings and arrows of an outrageous family, were swept right away. There were no poses about her, only cold, black anger.

The table was afflicted by her chilliness. Even Camillus, after Edwin, who wasn't present, the most ebullient, was smothered by the prevailing gloom. Ethelfleda, sniffing a little with self-righteousness, inclined to make little dagger-thrusts at Alban, who showed a stony surface, and Rosamund who proved too dangerous. Oswald sat in pontifical gloom. Dunstan was away engineering.

Cold gloom everywhere. No words from Mrs. Kent, monosyllables from Oswald, an intermittent and whispered muttering from the others. Not even

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the promise of Aunt Heppie's visit on the morrow drew a spark from them. Ominous this, for Aunt Heppie, outside her actual presence, was a source of unflagging enjoyment.

After dinner Mrs. Kent and Oswald rose and vanished utterly. That was the effect, though from the sound of their voices they were deeply engaged in the morning-room. But that *was* the effect—the angry withdrawal of the gods from earth.

Rosamund, after trying to get private conversation with Alban in the drawing-room, said: "We can't talk against Ethel's hen-noises. Come up to my attic."

"More mischief, I suppose," simpered Ethelfleda, as they went to the door.

"Could you suppose anything clean or decent, Ethel?" said Rosamund. "No, of course not. Your kind of brain isn't built that way."

In the attic Rosamund, curled like a kitten, listened moodily to all Alban had to tell.

"Oh, you've jolted 'em," she said in the end, but not with enthusiasm. "It was sweet of you to take the law business off Gilda's on to your own shoulders."

"I was down to that. I had to bluff. Nothing else seemed to move Edwin."

"That's it," said Rosamund. "We can't really move them at all. . . . Not Edwin, not any of them."

"I feel that. What can we do?"

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"My God," said Rosamund, almost with a moan, "what can we do?"

They were silent for a long time, each despairing, moody.

"Edwin's seeing her now, I suppose," said Alban, at last.

"Oh, that," said Rosamund. "I almost wish he wasn't. . . . It'll mean more dirtiness."

"You think so?" cried Alban, half starting up.

"What else, from Edwin? Don't rush off. You can't do anything."

"Can't I?" snapped Alban. "Can't I?"

"Punch his damn head off, I suppose," she smiled wanly at him. "Do him good, too. But what help will it be to—to her?"

Alban sat again. "We seem tied hand and foot," he said.

"We are," she answered, and again they were silent.

Suddenly from out its womb came a remarkable question.

"Alban, you're in love with Gilda, aren't you?"

Alban stared at the dim patch of white that now, in the growing darkness, stood for his sister's face. He couldn't believe he had heard right—couldn't answer. She had to say again, "You are in love with her, aren't you?"

"Is that quite nice?" he asked.

"Why not, if it's clean and honourable? If it doesn't touch her. I should be proud to love her if I were a man."

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"I am proud of it," said Alban, quietly.

"And it's the real thing, Alban? The thing that will stand up against anything—against whatever happens?"

"Why bring this in, Rosamund?" he said in a pained voice. "It really oughtn't to be brought up."

"I've got a reason, Alban," she said quickly. "Or it may only be an idea. . . . But I've got a feeling that maybe there'll come something that will test your love—terribly—in which only your love will save her. . . . Don't be ashamed of it, Alban. I've seen how things were; we all have, even Edwin, but I particularly. I've—I've felt what you feel, being rather like you inside, you know. There's nothing wrong about it. . . . It's—it's rather fine, Alban, the way you've got it. And I've got to talk about it because. . . . Oh, take that for granted, Alban, it's not a silly idea. . . . But the thing I want to know is whether it'll stand any strain."

"A strain? How do you mean . . . ?"

"Will it?"

"I think it would stand a strain."

"Think! only that?"

"I don't know. I've never gone into it. . . . Yes, I know it would stand a strain."

"Any sort of strain? A strain such as a feeling that all you thought about her had—had been wrong? An ugly, beastly strain?"

"I think so."

"Think?"

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"More than that. I feel it would stand up against anything."

"I believe it would. And—and don't forget it is a thing to count on."

"Rosamund, I really don't see where all this leads to."

"No? A man, your type of man, wouldn't think of—of things. But leave it. It's just an idea I've got into my head . . . Only, remember you've always got to love Gilda—hard." She paused, and went on, as though it was the same subject, only Alban, puzzled, felt it wasn't. "We've got some tough moments to face, Alban."

"Such as?"

"The family. When a family like ours is roused in its defence it can be very hard and brutal—a sort of monster, defending its wrongs, of course, but still defending. A mother like ours, Alban, will stop at nothing. She'll do ugly things, rotten things too, in order that she and hers shall survive unsullied and unthreatened."

Alban stirred uneasily, a sort of protest, but he could not put it into words. He had felt the menace of his mother already.

"Queer," went on Rosamund. "She's soft, indulgent, a dear in many things, but threatened, as she thinks, particularly threatened with regard to the family, the Kents, the Kent name, Kent Drugs—the whole boiling of our social standing, financial worth, our supposed position in the world and all the rest of the things that make her say the word 'Kent' with a

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sort of ecstatic awe—threatened there, she is a tiger, implacable. She'll break you, she'll break me, she'll break anybody she has power over rather than that this holy thing called 'Kent' should suffer. And she'll do it on all the highest principles. She'll be as ruthless as a man-killer, all for the sake of the family and the family interests."

"You're saying that this is what we have to face? That she'll break *us* . . . you?"

"I'm independent," said Rosamund. "I'm self-supporting."

"Me then?" said Alban, in amused scorn. And as Rosamund didn't answer, he went on, "What power has she over me, my dear? I'm as free as you are."

"Alban," said Rosamund, on a note of urgency, "you've always underestimated her—her and Oswald. You've taken them too much for granted. You even think there is nothing to fear from slow, soft, heavy people like them. You're wrong, Alban. They're dangerous. Truly they are. And they don't love you. No, I'm not being horrid. As a son and brother they may put up with you, like you even. But as Alban the disturbing element, as the boy of violent and frightening opinions, they don't like you. They're afraid of you. They are afraid of your upsetting all their solid, profitable plans. You've always been an anarchist to them, and they're scared of your bombing the family fortunes, the family interest, the family name. That's why they've held you off, bottled you up. They are

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afraid, and with that sort of solid mind fear means hate."

"That's all rather fantastic, you know, Rosamund."

"And I suppose your sort will never believe such things of their own blood," sighed Rosamund.

"No," said Alban, emphatically. "Not a bit."

"Well, I've warned you. Look out," she said.

"This is the thing you think we face?"

"That and other things."

"I don't see how Gilda figures in it."

"You'll find it's all bound up together. Look out."

"Oh, I shall not keep my eyes shut," he said.

She sighed faintly from the darkness of the couch. "I hate what's coming," she murmured. "If it wasn't for Gilda, I'd bolt. I love Gilda—I suppose that's the you in me. And she really loves me—I think that's for the you in me, too."

"Rosamund!" came Alban's protest.

"Yes, underneath I'm certain she loves you, always has loved you."

"That is certainly not the thing to say," snapped Alban.

"No," said Rosamund. "I suppose it's not. But it's a fact—to remember, Alban."

Next morning the tension was still maintained. There was no sign of Edwin in the house, and no one

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knew of the result of Edwin's visit to Gilda. Alban imagined that his mother had packed him out of Earlhampton for the present, just as she was determined to pack Alban out of Earlhampton ultimately.

She told him bluntly, coldly, that she expected him to leave for Moap's Farm at the earliest possible moment.

"My part in Edwin's engagement is the reason, of course," he said as coldly.

"I do not wish to discuss this," she said frigidly.  
"I wish you to go at once."

"I am sorry, Mother," he said, "I cannot go."

"You absolutely refuse to obey me?"

"If you put it that way, yes. I will not go until this matter is satisfactorily settled."

"That is insolent of you," she said with her new, cold power. "It is not your business. You have no right at all to assume that it is. I will not allow you that right."

"I have made it my business," he said. "I intend to carry it through."

Just for a flash, her old self blazed through her rigid attitude: "And to think that this girl, this stranger, should come between brother and brother, mother and son, smash up a family in this way. There is no punishment painful enough for such an abominable creature."

"I can only say again that you are looking at this in the wrong way, Mother. You are letting your feelings for Edwin make you unjust."

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She froze at once.

"I will not argue," she said. "Answer definitely: Are you going back to the Farm or not?"

"I am not—not until I am satisfied that the right thing has been done."

"Very well," she said. "I know how to deal with you."

She went out of the room without another word.

### iii

At the Factory the same tension.

Oswald was cold, aloof, had nothing at all to say. Alban in his own office found that the usual letters he attended to were not on his desk. As he had not fallen into the general routine since his return from the Farm he had nothing to do. At a loose end he went into Oswald's office to discuss his future line of work.

As he began to speak, Oswald said coldly. "You have seen your mother?"

"I spoke with her before coming here."

"She told you what we had decided?"

Alban stared, a little inclined to flare up—what *he*, Oswald, the dull-minded had decided . . . it was an impertinence. Though his eyes glowered he said evenly enough: "Mother told me she wanted me to go back to the Farm."

"And are you going?"

"I am not going."

"Very well," said Oswald, a thousand miles up in

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the air. He pointedly went back to his work. Alban looking at his bent head with its feeble, ragged, thinning crown, felt inclined to laugh at the childishness of the fellow.

"I take it that decides you not to give me work?" he said with a half laugh.

"That is so," said Oswald, without looking up.

Alban did laugh. Really, this owl was too fatuous.

"This is all very cheap, you know," he said, "worthy of the lowest kind of kitchen novelette."

"As you like, but that is how things stand." Oswald now looked up and Alban had a fierce impulse to thump the heavy, stupid face. The dull pomposity of the fellow! The airs the thick-brain gave himself! . . . Instead, he laughed again.

"And we don't argue with you," Alban jeered in mockery. "We don't discuss it. The command of Heaven has gone forth and mere mortals will kindly tremble and obey."

Oswald gaped. Exquisitely foolish in his bewilderment, this Oswald who never could grasp anything until a fortnight after. He cleared his throat as though to speak, but said instead: "You heard what I said. There is nothing more to be said."

"We'll see about *that* later," said Alban, and he left the Factory.

He was queerly elated. Why, he did not know. Perhaps his fighting spirit made him so. Perhaps

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the feeling that now he really was at grips had something to do with it. Certainly he was buoyant, more buoyant than Rosamund, who was inclined to view the encounter with anxiety.

He laughed at the anxiety he saw in her dark eyes. "Don't get scared," he said. "They know where we stand, anyhow. There'll be no more need for mincing matters. You said there was going to be a fight. Well, it's on, and it's going to be a proper one. You're not afraid of what you yourself saw coming, are you, Rosamund?"

"No-o," she said. "We must fight. It wasn't exactly that. It's their attitude, Mother's and Oswald's."

"Pooh, Oswald. I'm not going to worry about the pompousness of a chump like Oswald."

Rosamund's look became more anxious: "You know you're wrong, Alban. You mustn't underrate Oswald because he seems dense and slow."

"He *is* dense and slow," said Alban. "I don't suppose he's ever had a bright or an original idea since he was born. His brain moves like a steam-roller."

"Oh," she almost wailed, "don't you see that's it. It's because his mind is so fat, dull, and slow that he's dangerous, once he gets anything into it. I hate those slow, stubborn, mulelike minds when they are vindictive."

"Pooh," laughed Alban again. "What *can* he do?"

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"I don't know—but a steam-roller can squash things."

"Yes, but you've got to lie in front of the darn thing to give it its chance to do it. I'm not lying in front of Oswald. Where can he touch me?"

Rosamund sat back with a sigh, "And I suppose, after all, if you were built cautious you wouldn't fight."

"That's more than probable," grinned Alban. "And we're going to fight."

"There's worse to come," said Rosamund, flashing her glance at him. "We're only beginning. The real things that are going to test you are coming."

Alban laughed again. "Let them come," he said, not realising any special significance in her tone. "I'll not let Gilda down."

"Don't forget for a minute you said that," said Rosamund, insistently. "I called at the Conroys this morning, by the way."

"Any news from Gilda?"

"I didn't see her," said Rosamund. "She wouldn't see me. She kept to her room. Not very well, the maid said."

Alban frowned a little.

"Edwin did see her, I suppose, last night?"

"Yes. That may be the reason, Alban."

Again he frowned: "Oh, well, we're only beginning on Edwin, too." Rosamund made a little gesture, and sighed. "What's the matter, Rosamund?" he finished.

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"Oh," she said, "oh, nothing. I mustn't blunt your spirit."

But nothing could blunt his spirit. Even the chilly and hostile atmosphere of the lunch table, with Aunt Heppie, now arrived, presiding like a stony and familiar ghoul, failed to disturb him.

"I hear you are being a tomfool as usual, Alban," snapped Aunt Heppie, by way of greeting.

"As usual," he smiled back at her.

"It's about time you got a little sense," she snapped.

"*You* know that's impossible," he laughed back. "You and I are unchanging. It's the Kent blood."

His mother would once have checked him for that sort of thing. She did not speak. She sat cold, a hostile neutral. Aunt Heppie glared in arid calm.

"Even a clodhopper of a boy should have got some sense of decency by your age," she said tartly.

"It depends on your reading of decency," said Alban. "Some people spell it expediency. I don't. But then I'm unwise in my generation."

Aunt Heppie said sparsely, "A frantic, bull-headed young Bolshevik."

"Names, just names, Aunt Heppie," laughed Alban. "My attitude in other people might be called 'the final and considered opinions of aunts.'"

"You talk like a parrot," snapped Aunt Heppie. "All talk. Where do you think *you* are going to get to in this world with such ideas?"

"Is that the thing that matters most, Aunt?" said Alban, quietly.

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Aunt Heppie stared at him with a queer stillness. She said unexpectedly, "I've heard your father say exactly that in exactly that voice." She peered at him with her cold eyes. "Yes, you're your father—with a will to back you up."

There was a silence after that, born not so much of the words but of the unparalleled gentleness of Aunt Heppie's tone. The silence endured throughout the clammy meal.

### v

When Alban came in at four o'clock from a walk, Rosamund met him in the hall. There was a queer white look on her face, and she was panting a little.

"Oh, Alban," she cried, "I've been waiting for you with every bit in me. I've been yelling in my soul for you to come. Gilda's here."

"Here?" cried Alban, feeling the tragedy in her voice. "Where is she?"

"With Mother. She's been with Mother in the morning-room for twenty minutes. It's awful."

"Awful! Don't be silly. Why awful?"

Her eyes as she stared at him looked curiously big for her face. Her lips parted, but she had difficulty in speaking. Only with an effort she managed: "You'll see. You'll know!"

"You mean she looks bad?"

"Bad!" Rosamund choked. "She's broken—smashed! That beast has broken her."

Alban moved towards the morning-room door.

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"Had I better go in?" he asked. Rosamund caught his sleeve.

"No, wait," she whispered. "That's Mother's voice—it's fiendish."

They waited in the dim hall. The loose handle of the morning-room door rattled. Mrs. Kent came out. Her cold ferocity was evident—and something more. Her bosom was labouring with unsuppressible emotion. There was a film of furious red under the sallow skin of her neck and cheeks. She had the look of a woman affronted, outraged; made utterly venomous by what she had been listening to.

At the door she faced half about. "And you will leave this house at once," she cried in the cruellest tone Alban had ever heard from her. "At once! I will not have you in this house for another minute."

She swung about again, made for the drawing-room. She ignored Rosamund and Alban, perhaps did not see them, though they might have touched her. Did not hear them, either, for though Alban called, "Mother, what is it?" she went blindly past him and into the farther room.

Rosamund had already run from his side into the morning-room. Alban followed, but stopped at the door.

Gilda was standing in the middle of the room. She was standing limply, her air an indescribable tragedy. Her face was awful: despair, terror, complete moral collapse, complete hopelessness blended in a look, set and terrible. It was that look which struck Alban inactive. It was the look of a dead

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woman; worse than that, of a woman already suffering the tortures of the damned.

She stood terribly limp. Rosamund ran to her, touched her, and at once she exhibited an awful, a cringing life. She shrank back—backed from Rosamund's touch.

Rosamund reached out long thin arms, caught her—clumsily, gauchely, exquisitely. With uncouth and lovely gestures she dragged Gilda to her, forced her to the young breast, pulled her head down on the young shoulder. She fought to take the struggling girl to her heart. And as she fought she cried in a sobbing, splintered little voice: "Oh, you dear . . . I know . . . I do know . . . Oh, you poor dear, I do know . . . I do . . . I know everything . . ."

Gilda gave in, her arm went over Rosamund's thin shoulder, and she began to cry—cry . . .

Alban slipped from the room, shutting the door.

## vi

In the drawing-room, Mrs. Kent was before a graven Aunt Heppie, not walking, but making queer little bird hops this way and that. She was talking, talking; pouring out a furious, splashing stream of talk. Her face had a strange mottled look. Every now and then she gave vent to an "Ough" which seemed wrenched right out of her body.

Alban watched her for a moment. He was strangely without feeling. He felt neither the sense

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of tragedy that suddenly seemed to make everything black, nor elation over the fight. He was blank.

He walked forward to speak to his mother. She jerked about with incredible violence, cried before he could speak, "Has that woman left my house?"

"Gilda? No."

She glared. Was she going to strike him? She turned, went swiftly to the fireplace and pressed the bell. He suddenly realised the meaning of her action. She was ringing for the maid to show Gilda out of the house.

"You can't do that, you know," he said with surprising calm and emphasis.

"Can't! . . . My own house!" She steadied herself. "I will not have a creature like that in my house . . . A creature! Ough!"

"But, please, be sensible . . ."

"And this," coming up to him so that her body almost touched his body, "and *this* is the woman you are defending. This creature . . . This shameless—*bitch*."

Alban had never heard his mother use such a word. The mere sound of it on her lips, the venom she put into it gave it a quality of unutterable vileness."

"Be silent," he commanded. "How dare you talk like that?"

"Dare," she rapped. "I'll dare. I'll show you—all of you . . ."

She sprang away from him to the door. The maid was coming upstairs. She was determined to have

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her way. In the door she stopped. Rosamund was at the top of the stairs, Rosamund calm, firm, rigid; Rosamund saying quietly to the maid: "Hetty, will you get a taxi, please. At once, please."

"Hetty!" began Mrs. Kent. Rosamund crossed the hall. "That will do, Mother," she said quietly. Firmly she pushed her mother into the room and closed the door.

"That woman is to leave my house," said Mrs. Kent again and furiously.

"I am taking her home, Mother," said Rosamund, firm, cold, immobile all the time.

"You will do nothing of the sort," cried Mrs. Kent. Rosamund did not answer.

"Do you hear?" shouted Mrs. Kent. "I will *not* have it."

"Will you get my hat and coat, please, Alban?" said Rosamund.

"Stop," cried Mrs. Kent as Alban went towards the door. "So *you* defy me too—you?"

"I'm not defying you," said Rosamund, coldly. "Somebody must take Gilda home. She is not fit to go alone."

"That is her own lookout," said Mrs. Kent. "I have no pity for *that* type of woman. And I will not have a daughter of mine consorting with such a creature."

Rosamund's lips tightened. She did not speak however.

"If you choose to go with that—that vile thing,

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you do so at your peril. This house is not for you. You do not enter it again."

"Very well," said Rosamund. She looked at Alban, a signal to get her outdoor things. But Mrs. Kent had not finished: "Utterly shameless!" she began. "A worthy companion of that low thing. Well, I wash my hands of you. She has succeeded in bringing ruin to this house. She has turned two of my children against me. She has caused bitterness and trouble . . . She comes here with this vile accusation against a son of mine . . . Go with her, then. If you prefer a creature so debased to your own mother, if you love this strumpet more than me . . ."

Alban found himself trembling. "What's that you are saying, Mother?"

Aunt Heppie acidly: "You're a fool, Agnes. Raving on like this when they don't know."

Mrs. Kent stopped, gasped, stared. Rosamund said coldly: "I know."

Both the older women cried: "You know—you know?"

Rosamund nodded.

"You know that this gel is about to be the mother of an illegitimate child?" said Aunt Heppie, with appalling distinctness.

"Good God!" cried Alban.

"He didn't know, anyhow," said Aunt Heppie with a sniff at Mrs. Kent.

Alban was standing before his mother. "I don't believe it," he cried, while something dreadful in

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him believed it only too sickeningly. "I don't believe it."

His mother said with a scornful snort, "Ask your sister. She believes it. She knows."

"Rosamund?"

"It's true," said Rosamund.

Alban took a step between the three women. He looked from one to the other with a mad, unnerved glance. He looked at the set face of Rosamund. Yes, it was true, absolutely true.

Suddenly he lifted his clenched fists and his face convulsed: "The damned cur," he shouted. "The damned, bloody cur . . . Where is he? Is he here? Tell me where I can get at him . . . ?"

His mother's voice, shrill with hysteria screamed: "There you go. Your brother . . . You'll believe any dirty-minded little slut rather than your brother . . . She can befoul his name; she can try her tricks to get hold of him, his money, and you believe her. A woman like that, who lies as readily as she does, goes with any man as though . . . ?"

Alban swung on her. "Shut up," he snarled. "Keep your foul tongue quiet . . . Do you want me to loathe you more than I do now . . . ?"

His mother ran before the animal ferocity of his face. She backed and sidled away from his, and her mouth dropped open in fear. He looked like murder. He stood glaring at her.

There was a sound of brakes outside the house. Rosamund touched Alban's arm.

"I'll go straight away without a hat," she said.

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"Come round to the Conroys in half an hour. Bring some of my clothes . . . Or, it doesn't matter. I'll tell you about them then." Her hand gripped his arm tightly for an instant, and she was gone.

They heard the door across the hall open, the handle of the front door rattle. Mrs. Kent with a sudden fierceness started towards the door. Alban barred her way. With his body firmly across the door opening and his arms a little spread, he prevented all exit.

So they stood glaring at each other until they heard the taxi drive away.

## *Chapter XII*

### i

**R**O SAMUND herself opened the Conroys' door: "You're late," she said to Alban. "I expected you two hours ago."

She stood aside to let him enter.

"I know," he muttered. "I've been walking. I went out and walked—and forgot."

He made no movement, stood beyond the step, throwing, now and then, a glance into the house.

"Come in," said Rosamund, her quick eyes assessing his condition of mind. "You won't meet Gilda. She's gone to bed."

He looked at her, saw insistence, hard insistence in her eyes, came in slowly.

He stood hesitating, while she closed the door.

"Sit down," she said. "Help yourself to that whiskey. Mr. Conroy understands—and he won't be coming in. This is between you and me alone."

He obeyed, but she had to help him to whiskey. He was sitting white-faced, curiously blank, curiously battered. He was loose and numb. She looked at him for a long moment, holding the whiskey. When she put it into his hand he merely held it, staring at the carpet.

"Drink it, Alban."

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He drank it in a gulp, sat holding the glass. She took it from him. Stood over him.

"You're blaming Gilda," she said.

"I can't understand it," he said in a mutter. "I can't. How could she—a girl like Gilda, do a thing like that?"

"You're not to blame her, Alban," she said. "You mustn't."

"Not blaming her exactly." His voice was toneless. "It's just that I don't understand . . . It's horrible. To happen to her. To her! I feel sick at the idea . . . physically. To her . . . of all women. I feel nausea . . . nausea." Actually he began to shudder with a queer, uncheckable violence.

Rosamund slipped onto the arm of his chair. Her young arm went about his head and cheek, its thin, smooth softness cool against his burning skin. She pulled his head strongly against the hollow of her body, the stayless body, strong, flexible, soft, restful.

"I know, dear," she said. "I know, dear. It's hell to think about . . . and it's so unfair. But you mustn't blame Gilda. It's so cruel of you."

"I'm not cruel," he said. "But I don't understand. It's like seeing her in slime. How could she go down into it? It seems so impossible."

"We haven't been tempted, Alban. How can we understand?"

"But a girl like Gilda, you'd think she'd be proof against anything like that."

"We don't know," said Rosamund. "We've never

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been through anything like that. And perhaps she did resist, perhaps the *other* girls did too, but Edwin is too expert."

"Don't," cried Alban, "that's too beastly." Under the jar of it he had become more alert. Perhaps Rosamund had expected him to.

"We've got to face facts," she said. "You've got to see where the real blame lies. With us, I think."

"Us?"

"Yes. We allowed a girl like Gilda to become the prey of a man like Edwin."

Alban was certainly alert now.

"You mean she ought to have been warned? She ought to have been told what sort of man Edwin was?"

"I'm certain of it . . . It was like caging an unsuspecting lamb with a hungry tiger."

Alban stared at her: "That is what I said. Did you know I wanted them—Oswald and Mother—to tell her in the beginning?"

"Yes, I knew. By us I don't actually mean you. I mean Mother, Oswald—me even. Yes, me. I was her best friend. I could have done something, if only drop hints. But I funkied it, just as Mother and Oswald funkied it. Only I'm worse . . . I saw where moral duty lay—and funkied."

"For the matter of that," he said evenly, always ready to defend other people rather than himself, "I should have said something too, to Mr. Conroy, for instance."

"Perhaps," she said. "But I don't know. That

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was so obviously Oswald's province . . . Anyhow, nobody did, and Gilda has suffered. So if there's any blame, we're in for it, too."

"I see that," said Alban, in a firmer voice. "And it all arose because—because—"

"Because Edwin is a damned past-master in the handling of women," said Rosamund, fiercely.

"Ah, she's told you?"

"Gilda?" Rosamund was surprised. "Nothing! She's told me practically nothing. She wouldn't, you know."

"But you know?"

"I guessed." She saw his eyes. "Lots of little things told me, little things building up to a conclusion. Gilda's insisting on marrying a man like Edwin, when Edwin was cold-shouldering her . . . not like her. Her powdering. Her anxiety about her appearance. The way she jumped when you said she looked pinched . . ."

"But I can't see any clue in that. I've been over it, and can't."

"No," she smiled wanly. "You can't. Queer, isn't it? You missed it, and it was the first thing that hit me. That's just the difference between a woman and a man."

"A woman, maybe, but you seeing something—a kid!"

"A modern kid," she smiled. "A modern female kid. We know an awful lot; a swing-back from the Victorian, virgin, know-nothing-at-all. The modern girl knows all about sex, anyhow the surface facts. I

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daresay the Victorian girl did too—but only as a sort of sticky thrill. We do it solemnly, discuss it coldly and realistically—analyse the damn unanalysable thing. Daresay we get the same sort of joy out of the talk as the hushed simpers of the Victorians. And for the same reason. We like talking about it—the attack and method is different, that is all. We are facty you see. And frightfully wise in our teens. Can spot the signs in a flash. The things you said about Gilda gave the signs; that and Gilda's attitude, and what I guessed had happened at Iamouth all added up . . . Added up right, too. The poor darling."

"Iamouth. Are you saying . . . ?"

"That's where it happened," said Rosamund, finally.

Alban stood up and walked to the window. Again nausea had hold of him. Presently, "She told you it happened at Iamouth?" His face was sick and white as it turned to her.

"Alban, you know Gilda wouldn't tell me things like that. She's not the telling sort—no maker of cheap confidences. She told Mother because she was desperate, terrified to death. She was cornered . . . And I'll bet when she told Mother she took half the blame on herself, more perhaps . . ."

"No, don't speculate," cried Alban. "You said it—you said Iamouth. Why? I noticed nothing at Iamouth."

"Enough to convince me, anyhow," said Rosamund. "The whole business of Iamouth was a de-

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liberate trap of Edwin's. You can read *that* like a book."

"I can't," said Alban, wearily. "Tell me."

"I won't say that Gilda hasn't dropped a hint or two—unconsciously," said Rosamund. "But they only make certain the obvious. Edwin planned to get Gilda at Iamouth. It's all plain. You know I wrote you about the queer state Gilda was in. How she was helpless before Edwin. Edwin had reduced her to that condition. All that snubbing of his, all that staying away from her, all the philandering with Mrs. Hogarth—all part of his game, the game he knows so well, to work on her feelings, weaken her."

"Not deliberately."

"Deliberately. Do you know it was Edwin who told Gilda of Mrs. Hogarth, of her attractions . . . ?"

"No, no, Rosamund, I can't believe that, even of Edwin."

"You'll have to. It's fact. It's one of the things Gilda has let drop. Edwin reduced her to helplessness before him—to moral pulp. I don't understand the state, thank God, but there it was. She was a bundle of terrors. She was scared to death at the idea of losing him."

"The fear of loss—that's what you wrote. I didn't understand it. I don't quite understand it now. In the first days at Iamouth I felt that she was not so much in love with him as before, I felt she had become disillusioned even."

"I think she had—with her mind. I don't think she was in love with him any more—*that* way. It

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was something physical, outside her reason. No, I don't understand it either, but there it was. Something that controlled her simply grew panicky at the more idea of losing him—*him*, understand, not his position or money or anything but him. The physical him, maybe. When he played on that fear, as he knew how to play, she was simply will-less before him, clay in his hand, his creature. And he knew. And he knew . . .”

She was silent for a moment.

“It's a ghastly thing to be mastered like that by a love—by a passion, an infatuation. I don't suppose it'd happen to me. I'm too cold. Oh, well, that's speculation again. Gilda—Gilda knew the risk, a little, I think. She did offer to break things off. Or perhaps that was only her mind—before the other thing submerged it. But, of course, he wouldn't have that.”

“You say ‘of course’?”

“Because he hadn't got what he wanted,” she said, with a snap. “Because he hadn't hit at you perhaps.”

“Me?” Alban was startled.

“It's been sheer pleasure to him all along,” said Rosamund, “that you loved Gilda and he was her master. He's hated you always.” She paused before going on. “It's easy to read the Edwins of the world, just plain, simple, brutish, hunting animal . . . Woman hunting. I suppose he was jaded with coarser types when his eyes found Gilda, or maybe he wanted to cut you out, or maybe again—we'd better give the devil his due—Gilda's distinction and

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beauty did call to some remnant of fineness in him. He saw her as the beau ideal wife, however amusing the other sort were. Or maybe it was mere hunting instinct all over again, with the added zest of pulling down a finer prey. Anyhow, he hunted and pulled her down, down to the level of an engagement. And then the hunting was over and he was dull and bored."

She played with a glass.

"I've met the type, seen it. . . . Most girls know it. Hunting is the thing that excites that sort. After the capture the zest goes out of them. That's what happened to Edwin. If he ever thought he could play the part of a sober, engaged man, he soon found he was wrong. They hadn't a scrap in common, you see, their minds were miles apart. They couldn't even talk to each other in the same language. He was bored, bored. But he couldn't give her up. He had won this splendid girl, but he couldn't give her up—not to you, for instance. He couldn't bear the thought of giving her up to you. And then there was the other thing. The beastly thing. He'd got her . . . but not entirely, not as entirely as he was used to having women. And until he'd got her that way, he couldn't count his triumph, his hunting, his supremacy over his victim complete."

"It's vile, the thing you are suggesting. I can't bear your talking of it," cried Alban.

"Facts, Alban—face them. You've got to with the Edwins of this world. With them it isn't love

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of women—it's desire of women. It's in their bodies. They must have the—the whole thing. Must! That was why Edwin wouldn't give Gilda up."

"But he—he couldn't compare her with the disgusting women of his conquests?" cried Alban.

"He did. We have the result. Facts, Alban. You can't get away from what was in Edwin's mind because of what he has done. . . . He had to do it cleverly with a nature like Gilda's, that was part of the pleasure in it. A long battle . . . wearing Gilda down. . . . Weakening her with this terror of loss . . . troubling her with suggestions that she could not really be in love with him because she was too cold. Trying to get her on the rebound when he was kind . . ."

"Don't," cried Alban. "It's disgusting."

"A long process," she went on implacably, "it had to be with a girl like Gilda. But his skill and experience beat her innocence, her trust in the cur. Iamouth. . . . He played her at Iamouth. Let her swing away from him as far as she could—he knew the swing back would be as sweeping . . ."

"The pendulum nature . . . I remember I was afraid of that myself," said Alban.

"He *counted* on it. He knew Gilda's ardent, 'giving' nature. That deliberate delay in coming down to Iamouth—he knew how that would swing her into the depths. Then the deliberate production of the Hogarth woman, Gilda's acknowledged rival, the—the woman who—who looked, anyhow,

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as though *she* would not be checked by—by squeamishness. Down she was, agonised, terrified at the closeness of that threat of loss, weak in his hands . . . absolutely without strength and defence against his sly, damned, vile, skilful attack. Snatching at the chance—any chance—of holding him. . . . And so he won."

She got up, walked to the corner in which Gilda herself had hidden.

"And he won," she said, her voice breaking. "He played on that dear's sweetest feelings with his vilest. She gave to him because she wanted to be all his. He won. His game was over and he left the field."

She curled herself up, pulled out her handkerchief and—cried.

ii

Half an hour went by before Alban said in a quiet, precise, if lifeless, voice.

"How does it stand now?"

"Edwin came round here last night and told her that he had no intention of marrying her."

"What did he say about the—child?"

Alban's voice was so clear, so even, so awfully even, that Rosamund straightened and peered through the darkness at his face. She saw it against the dark mauve of the window, its long lines as rigid as carven stone, the angles sharp and cruel in their precision.

"He says the child isn't his."

The grim head nodded.

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"Did he say anything about his intentions?"

"He snapped his fingers at her. Told her to do her worst. He was brute to the last. He practically told her that he intended to marry Mrs. Hogarth quickly, and that he was prepared to fight any claims she made. Of course, he knows a girl like Gilda won't go to law."

Alban moved into the room.

"All right," he said evenly. "Can we have some light? I put my hat down somewhere."

Rosamund switched on the light, but stood staring at him: a slip of a thing, red-eyed, smeared, mottled, unashamed. She stared and his grim, set look brought fear into her eyes. She came up to him, put her hand on an arm that was as unyielding as drawn steel. In a panic she began talking again.

"Gilda did not mean to give way. But she felt cornered: simply swamped by panic. She cried all night—all the morning. She was crying when I called round, that's why she couldn't see me. . . . She was desperate. There seemed no way out. There seemed nothing to do except go straight to Mother. It was the only thing she could do—except commit suicide. She was beside herself. She went to Mother, not to accuse Edwin, but to get Mother to persuade Edwin. It was to be a secret between Mother and her—but you see she had to do it. What else was there to do?"

"I think she did right," he said in his inflexible voice. "It wasn't wrong going, the wrong was in the way Mother took it."

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She stared at him for a long minute.

"Alban—Alban," she cried, clinging to him. "Don't blame Gilda. . . . Don't blame her. She's sweet still . . . clean. . . . And if you only saw her."

"I'm not blaming her, my dear," he said.

"But you're so hard," she moaned.

"Yes," he said, "I am. I've gone to stone. I can't feel."

"Don't be hard against Gilda."

"Not against her," he said. He moved a step, stood rigid again. "Tell Gilda, if she wishes to hear, that I am on her side. I will always be on her side. And I'm going to fight for her."

"Is that all?"

"And I haven't changed," he went on, as though she had not spoken. "I've gone hard, but not against her. This makes no difference between us. I'm—I'm her champion always."

He stood, lips taut, looking down at the carpet.  
"That's all," he said.

Rosamund said, "Here's your hat, dear."

"Thanks. I'll bring round, or send round your clothes to-morrow morning."

### iii

Mrs. Kent and Oswald were in the morning-room when he reached home. They were in conference, and unmistakably the conference concerned Edwin and the revelations of the afternoon.

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When Alban walked in on them, Oswald shuffled back nervously, fussily, in his chair, and Mrs. Kent stared with cheeks growing red and puffy.

Alban said with his curious new rigidity, "Where is Edwin?"

Mrs. Kent said, no less frigidly, "Your brother and I are talking privately. Please leave us, Alban."

"He isn't in the house," said Alban. "Is he at Brackenhurst?"

"Where Edwin is," said Mrs. Kent, "does not concern you. You will kindly not interfere in this matter at all."

"It is my affair, too," said Alban. "Have you sent for him?"

"Oswald," said Mrs. Kent, "will you take your brother out of the room and shut the door."

Alban looked from one to the other, as Oswald, unwillingly, rose. "If you don't answer my question, I take the next train to Brackenhurst."

Mrs. Kent bounced up: "This is beyond anything—an outrage on decency. Understand, Alban, you have already gone too far in this matter. I will have no more interference from you. You've already done harm enough."

"You're an infernal, uppish little swine," snapped Oswald, at last coming forward. "You've got nothing to do with this. Keep your meddling hands out of it. Your mother and I are dealing with it."

"You haven't answered me," he said. "Is Edwin coming here, or do I go down to Brackenhurst?"

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Mother and eldest son exchanged a rapid glance. Each glance said: "He *will* go down. He'll thrash Edwin in the publican woman's house even . . . There'll be a scandal. We must stop that."

"You are being unwarrantably impertinent," snapped Mrs. Kent. "Unwarrantable. I shall not forget or forgive it. . . . Who are you, to think that you are the only one to take action? Impertinence. *We* sent for your brother three hours ago. He will be here in the morning. And even when he does come we intend to brook no more of this mischief-making from you. . . . You do not come into . . ."

But Alban had not stopped to listen. At the information that Edwin was coming on the morrow, he turned and left the room.

## iv

He was told nothing about the meeting between Edwin and his mother and brother, but intuition, with a queer sort of clarity that was working in a mind numb and stony, told him that when his mother slipped out of the back of the house, she was going to the Factory.

He went to the Factory and had the satisfaction of seeing her erect, stout figure entering the gate ahead of him.

He was walking like a creature of stone. Even movement was a blunted sensation. He was stone all through. He couldn't feel. He couldn't feel

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this terrible thing about Gilda. He tried to. He had put the whole thing before his mind in a series of pictures, but he hadn't reacted. Neither pity, nor anger, nor disgust had thrilled him. He had become a stone automaton, knowing only, and mechanically, what he must do, what he must make Edwin and the family do to save Gilda.

He walked straight through the office into Oswald's inner room, arriving just as Oswald was wondering whether his mother's simple strategy had been enough, whether he ought not to lock his door to keep Alban out.

He sprang up angrily when Alban entered, and came round his desk threatening. "We don't want you in here," he snapped. "Get out of here."

Alban said evenly, "I'm staying."

"Do you want me to call the clerks and have you put out?"

"It's the only way you'll get me out," said Alban, evenly. "And I'll fight, too."

Once more looks flashed between the mother and the eldest son, looks saying, "The scandal of it, avoid that at all costs."

Oswald drew back towards his desk. Mrs. Kent was thinking rapidly, tight-lipped. She was thinking, "If we took a taxi back to the house we might lock ourselves in the morning-room before the little beast followed us."

Alban knew what she was thinking. "I am going to be present at this meeting, mother," he said, precisely, "if I have to break my way into it."

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Mrs. Kent flashed a dark look of sheer hate at him. Edwin, who had been crouching in a chair, the sneer on his face a curtain over his fear, sniggered. He said:

"He's made up his mind, Mother. He probably has his own reason for it. It may be wise to let him stay."

Edwin had already made up his mind as to the line he would take. Alban helped that line. Edwin showed that he was going to attack rather than defend directly they were seated, directly Mrs. Kent said, "You know why we sent for you, Edwin?"

"Oh," he sneered, "Gilda, of course."

Mrs. Kent's fingers drummed on Oswald's desk. "I won't have that tone," she said. "It is a grave matter, a terrible matter. This—this girl makes a horrible accusation against you."

"Don't I know it?" he said wearily. "Haven't I seen her? She tried it on me."

Mrs. Kent and Oswald looked up quickly. It was plain to see the hope, the satisfaction in their eyes.

"It's not true?" cried Mrs. Kent, breathing quickly.

"You are putting words into his mouth," said Alban, evenly.

"Stop that. Let your brother speak," cried Oswald. "You understand what this means, Edwin? This girl accused you of a terrible thing, a horrible thing . . ."

"I know," said Edwin, carrying the attack into the enemy quarters with an air of weary indifference.

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"She says she's going to have a child by me. It's a lie."

He glanced swiftly out of the corner of his pert eyes at Alban, as he said this. Alban was unmoving, his glance steady upon Edwin. Edwin's eyes immediately ran away from those eyes.

"Edwin," cried his mother, "you declare it isn't true?"

"Of course it isn't true."

"Edwin," said Oswald between his knowledge of what must be the truth and his satisfaction at a chance of dodging it, "be careful, this is a very serious business. You are ready to swear to it?"

"Good God!" cried Edwin, irritably. "Do you want me to go on repeating 'It's a lie! It's a blasted lie' all day? Isn't once enough for you?"

"It isn't," said Alban, quietly. "They don't believe you. No sane person could. You have 'liar' written all over you."

"That is enough, Alban," said Mrs. Kent, icily. "I believe him. I believe my own son."

Alban looked at her steadily. She bridled under the cold glance.

"You know he is lying," he said evenly.

"Edwin's word is as good as that creature's," she answered hotly.

"It isn't, and you know it isn't," said Alban.

"I won't argue with you," she snapped. "Your mind is perverted. You would take the side of anybody against your own family."

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"I know, as you know, that Edwin is lying, and that Gilda is not," said Alban.

"Pah!" she cried. "A creature of that sort! A woman who can behave as she behaved will stoop to any lie, just as she will stoop to anything to capture a rich husband. Do you think I'm going to pay the slightest attention to a strumpet?"

Oswald shifted nervously at his desk. His mother was going much too far, he thought—very much too far with a madman like Alban. His eyes appealed to his mother, warned her, shifted to Alban. Alban was staring at Mrs. Kent, his glance too sombre even for contempt.

"She is what your son made her," he said without emotion.

"My son," she sneered, "and your own brother, too. You believe anything against your own brother."

"There's his record," said Alban. "When a girl of Gilda's kind gives her word against a man like Edwin, we have no choice but to believe her."

"And pretty anxious you are to fasten this on to me, too, I don't doubt," sneered Edwin.

Alban swivelled quickly round in his chair. Edwin shrank back a little before the fierce significance of the motion. Oswald said quickly: "No personalities now. We'll have none of that sort of thing. We're here to get to the bottom of this calmly . . . see what's to be done."

"We've got to the bottom of it," snarled Edwin, rising. "I've given the girl the lie direct. I've

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finished with it, and that's all that's got to be said."

Alban, without rising, said coldly: "You're going to marry her, Edwin. Don't make any mistake. You may lie and bluff as you like, but the truth is apparent. You're going to marry her."

Edwin turned on him, his teeth bared: "You be damned for a stinking, interfering fool. I know who I'm going to marry, and it won't be your Gilda."

"You're going to marry her," repeated Alban, with his terrible evenness. "You've behaved like the cad you are, but you are going to keep your word and marry her. Understand, there's going to be no getting out of that. You're going to marry her. You've got to repair the harm you did at Iamouth."

"Iamouth," cried Edwin, suddenly leering in his smile. "So you fix it at Iamouth, do you? How damned convenient."

"She said it was at Iamouth," said Oswald, quickly, for he saw the look that had come into Alban's eyes.

"She naturally had to," sneered Edwin. "I wasn't the *only* one at Iamouth."

Alban rose very slowly from the chair. Mrs. Kent rose, too. She cried: "That's enough of this. We've heard enough. It is finished. We'll go home now. Boys—come . . ."

Alban was standing in front of Edwin, his eyes burning into his face.

"You marry Gilda Conroy. Understand!" he said tonelessly.

"I'll see you to hell," snarled Edwin. He backed away a pace. His face became a leering mask of

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evil. "You fool," he spat. "Do you think I intend to father my own brother's bastard!"

Mrs. Kent gave a little cry. Alban sprang.

### v

Edwin, ready for it, snatched a round ebony ruler and lashed at his brother's head. The blow glanced down the temple, tore Alban's cheek open.

He came straight on as though he had not felt it. Edwin lashed again, struck a shoulder, and Alban's fist caught him full in the mouth. He staggered and Alban struck again, a lifting blow under the chin. Edwin flung the ruler, which sang by Alban's head, and in return received a punch that knocked him right across the desk.

He fell in a chaos of papers, and Alban was on top of him. Alban's hands were at his throat, and they gripped, and gripped again. Edwin moved with arms and feet. It was like beating with straws at a vice. He kneed Alban in the stomach. Alban lifted him, lifted him by the throat and shook him as a dog worries a bone. He shifted the body on the desk so that he could throttle without interruption, and dug in again, his elbows stiffening to a terrible rigidity.

Edwin let out a thick, choking scream of panic, his face became purple and congested, his eyes began to roll. Oswald dashed at Alban, tried to pull his hands loose.

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"My God," he shouted. "My God, he's killing him!" He yelled for the clerks.

Clerks came rushing in. They saw Edwin with a face that looked almost black, and Alban with features calm and graven steadily throttling the life out of him. They saw Oswald ineffectually trying to loosen that iron grip.

He yelled again: "Quick, for the love of God. He's killing him. Pull him off. . . . It'll be murder."

Two clerks flung themselves on Alban, began to fight his terrific, immobile strength. They all went crashing across the office, spilling chairs as they staggered, but Alban still hung on. A clerk who knew something about wrestling, got his arm between Alban's arms, and with a twisting leverage broke the deadly hold.

Edwin went flopping to the floor and lay disgustingly, his limbs twitching. But he wasn't dead. They all stood looking down at him as Oswald made sure of that, the clerks holding Alban's arms.

Oswald's sweating face turned to them.

"All right," he said with relief. "But, by God, a near thing."

Alban, with a single gesture, shrugged the clerks from him. Picking up his hat, he went out.

## *Chapter XIII*

i

GILDA herself, quite suddenly, quite unexpectedly, came into the room.

Rosamund, with her arm about Alban's neck, had been listening to his version of what had happened. She'd heard something about it. It seemed many people had heard.

He had said: "I went off—walking again. Just blindly, you know. I didn't realise where I was until I was miles away, in the Forest. When I got home it was past midnight. I didn't see anybody. This morning it was the same. My breakfast was brought to my room—pointedly—by Camillus. I didn't want to talk, but I don't suppose he would have if I'd tried him. . . . Nobody downstairs, everybody keeping out of my way, of course. So I came out again. Came here."

"Edwin's better—we've heard that. Quite all right, in fact," said Rosamund.

"Oh, is he?" said Alban, in a voice of complete indifference.

"He—he was seen going off to Brackenhurst again," said Rosamund, nervously.

"That'll make no difference," said Alban, evenly. "He knows that now."

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Rosamund made a little gesture of despair. "What's the good, Alban," she moaned. "You can't make him marry Gilda."

"I haven't finished with him yet," said Alban. "He knows that."

"Even if he marries her," said Rosamund, staring blankly ahead. "What a life for her—it'll be horrible."

Alban stirred uneasily. "I thought of that, too," he said, "while he was sitting in front of me, spitting his filth. The mere idea of her marrying a fellow like that is revolting. He's brute all through, you know, Rosamund. Men who live as he does become like that. Whatever spark of decency he ever had has gone. And to marry a man like that . . ."

"You can't bear the thought, either," said Rosamund, softly.

"It makes me sick. But there it is, he owes it to her."

"If there was only another way out," said Rosamund.

"But there isn't," he said. "There isn't. I've thought and thought, but it's the bottom of a sack. I've even thought of carrying her right out of all this vileness to Margarettting, and—and hiding her there."

"She wouldn't go there," said Rosamund, slowly.

Alban looked up, and she knew the words had pained him, pained him without his quite under-

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standing why, as is the manner with men. And she was glad.

"I suppose not," he said quietly. "The associations would be terrible."

"Not that," she said gently, and her hand began to play with his hair. "It's you. Since this happened she's begun to realise you. It's dawned on her that she's always been in love with you."

He put up his hand, caught hers, stopped it. "You mustn't say things like that, Rosamund," he said very soberly.

"No," she murmured. "No, I suppose not. . . . But it's interesting . . . and sad, too. Just when this makes all the difference . . ."

His hand gripped so tight on hers that she stopped. He was quiet for a minute. Then he said as though he could not argue against the irrevocable:

"But, you see, it doesn't make any difference, Rosamund. Somehow it doesn't. I don't know if it should or shouldn't—I only know it doesn't. I suppose . . . once having got to love her I can't get out of it. I love her now, just the same. The—the other thing, it's as though it had nothing to do with her. . . . I don't know whether you understand, Rosamund . . ."

Rosamund's fingers twisted themselves tight round his. She pulled his head towards her. Presently . . . "I'm glad you love her, Alban. I'm glad right through me . . ."

It was then they found that Gilda had entered the room—at what instant they did not know.

She stood inside the door, and she hadn't changed at all. It was as he had said, this thing that had happened seemed to have had nothing to do with her. She stood slim, pliant, sweet, beautiful, with her old air of delicate distinction. Only in her eyes could he see a change. It was fear, she was afraid—afraid of him.

He sprang up, and she seemed to shrink away from him—pitifully. She cried quickly, as though to stop his coming near her.

"It's about you and Edwin, Alban. I've heard what has happened. Oh, you mustn't . . . you must never do that again."

Alban was at her side. "You shouldn't have been told, Gilda," he said. "You must not be worried."

Her hands were gripped in front of her. "I won't come between brother and brother," she cried, her eyes agonised. "Oh, Alban—don't add that to it."

"I'm sorry I hurt Edwin," said Alban, quietly. "I didn't mean to when we began our talk."

"It's not that," she said. "It's because he's your brother. I can't bear the thought of that—my causing this strife in your family."

"The family don't look at it quite so decently," said Rosamund. "Don't worry about them, Gilda."

It was Alban who checked Rosamund. What she said was just, maybe, but it wasn't the thing to have weight with Gilda. He said quietly: "A certain

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'amount of strife can't be avoided, Gilda. These things have to be faced."

"Please, Alban," she whispered. "No more of it for my sake."

"My dear," he said, "we have to go through a rough time to straighten this thing out. It can't be helped. We've got to see it through, however much we hate it."

"No," she murmured, "no more, please, Alban. I've caused enough trouble among you as it is. I cannot allow more. I will not."

"We've got to look after your interests, Gilda," he persisted.

She stood before him, white-faced now, her fluent body held rigid by her will. She said slowly, as though forcing the words out one by one, "My interests have ceased."

Alban, not understanding, frowned. Rosamund slipped out of the room.

"My interests have ceased," she said evenly. "That's another reason why you must not go on. I don't want Edwin to marry me any more."

"Gilda!" he cried.

"I've been thinking it out," she said. "The way your mother and Edwin took what I told them has helped me to decide. I'm not expecting Edwin to marry me. It would be impossible."

"Gilda, you don't know what you are saying."

"I know. I see things clearly now. I went to your mother in a panic. I was mad with fright, but it seemed to me the only thing to do. I thought

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that directly she realised what had happened, directly she made Edwin feel the real meaning of it, the whole matter would be righted. He'd understand, and we'd be married as a matter of course. It seemed to me even that he would be anxious for it. But your mother . . . and then himself, when he came round here . . ." Her mouth twisted in torment. . . . "Could I ever think of marrying a man who acted like that? Could I force myself on any man who did not want me?"

He was close to her, his hand on her arm. "But, Gilda—the other thing," he said.

"I'll bear it," she said quietly.

"You can't. Not alone," he cried. "He must do his duty."

"No," she said quietly. "It wasn't duty I was expecting from Edwin. And I won't have any marriage as a duty. The thing is finished, Alban. You have been a true friend, truer than I deserve—and now you'll not do any more, please."

"But think, Gilda, think . . ."

She said with a gesture of finality, despair, "I have decided."

"You can't have realised—facing this out alone. . . ."

"I'll bear it," she said piteously.

He was shaking her elbow fiercely, yet tenderly. "You won't," he cried. "You can't. I won't let you bear it alone. I won't let you—you know that, Gilda. I'm not going to let you . . ."

She was drawing away from him, her lips trem-

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bling. "Alban," her voice breathed. "Alban! Don't . . . I can't bear that . . ."

"I'm not going to let you bear it alone," he insisted. "And you know why—you know why . . ."

They stood close, eyes held by eyes, eyes seeing in each other's eyes that *one* thing that each feared to mention. Gilda freed herself gently . . .

"You always were the dearest, most obstinate thing, Alban," she whispered with a touch of her old manner, keeping him at bay with it, yet tremulously, fearfully, with a fear that was afraid of herself. "Go home now, boy."

"You know," he demanded fiercely. "You do know?"

Hand on breast, she returned his gaze with eyes growing more pitiable under his.

"Yes," she whispered. "I know. That's why it's impossible—my dear."

He picked up his hat, laughed. Laughed again, looked at her, with a sudden fierce gesture caught her hand to his lips.

"I'll carry you off by force," he said, and left her.

### iii

Oswald, with an air of woody aloofness came out into the hall as Alban entered the house.

He said: "Oh, Alban. In here! Please!"

He opened the door of the morning-room, stood back, for all the world like a mute opening a door for a coffin. Alban wanted to laugh. Curious how

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all his black emotions had been swept away in that last minute with Gilda and only an impulse to laugh remained—to laugh at Oswald, the whole world.

Oswald stood stiffly near the door as though he could not endanger his morals by breathing the same air as his brother. He said stiffly, "You will catch the first possible train to-morrow for Margaretting."

"Turned out of house and home, eh?" said Alban, with a grin.

Oswald's face became severer at the grin. Also puzzled. He had expected argument, expostulation, anger—had prepared all the likely answers, in fact, and most of them were beauitously cutting. To be grinned at—most disconcerting! He could only say: "As to that, think what you like. You leave by the first train, that is all. The 9.20 will be the best, I think."

"No," said Alban, thoughtfully. "I doubt whether I shall. I shall have things to do all day to-morrow."

"As you will," said Oswald in his best mute manner. "But you do not enter this house after you have left it in the morning."

Alban looked at him and laughed outright.

"I mean what I say," snapped Oswald, sharply.

"I saw it," said Alban. "I'll take lodgings."

Oswald's face showed a trace of relief. Alban was himself leading to the conversation in which he (Oswald) had planned so effectively to crush him. So he said evenly: "I have spent the afternoon with the solicitor. I must warn you that if

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you persist in your present line of conduct, if you take sides with this girl against your family . . .”

Again Alban laughed. Again Oswald stopped disconcerted. He was angry. No Jove likes to have his blasting lightning snatched from him.

Alban read his face. “Don’t worry about that. That’s finished.”

Oswald felt a telegram in his pocket, reassured himself. “I don’t understand you,” he said.

“Gilda is not going on,” said Alban.

“You mean that she—she—” Oswald could not believe his ears.

“This marriage with Edwin, all of it. . . . That’s all over. You’ll hear no more of that.”

Oswald, gaping at him, cried in a stupefied voice, “You mean—you mean she’s heard?”

“Heard what?”

Oswald stared at him. Slowly he held out the telegram. On it was a message from Edwin announcing his marriage, apparently by special license, to Mrs. Hogarth of Brackenhurst.

Alban read it through and again laughed. He handed the telegram back to his brother with a gesture of contempt.

“No, she hadn’t heard that . . . but it’ll help. We’ve got a pretty low swine for a brother, Oswald. I hope you’re proud of him.”

Oswald still stared at him, puzzled. Everything was so unexpectedly wrong, and he wanted to get to the bottom of it.

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"She's made up her mind—not knowing this—not to go on. How? Why?"

"She's marrying me," said Alban, evenly.

### iv

Oswald, after an amazed stare, cried, "Just wait one moment," and vanished from the room.

Then his mother came in quickly with Oswald dragging indeterminately in her wake. He could see by the way she held her hands that she was full of rage and fear.

"What is this Oswald has told me," she cried. "Have you lost your senses, Alban. You marry that creature . . . ?"

"I am going to marry Gilda Conroy," he said.

His mother made a quick upward movement of rage and despair, "How dare you! How dare you even mention such a thing in this house."

"I won't, again," he said, "now I have told you."

She stood massive, her whole figure trembling with passion before him. "I forbid it," she stormed. "I forbid it."

He did not answer. It wasn't necessary.

"I forbid it," she again cried passionately. "I absolutely refuse to allow it. You shall not marry that creature. A woman who shows herself the vilest of the vile—a shameless, debased hussy."

"You are talking about my future wife, Mother."

She started back from him: "Ough! She comes

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first, does she? She comes before your own mother?"

"Yes," he answered.

"First one son, and then the other. She causes trouble everywhere. Rosamund, too . . . Wanton trouble. That's it, a wanton . . ."

"I think this has lasted long enough," said Alban. He walked toward the door.

"Ah . . . I see it," she cried at him. "Edwin was right. . . . What Edwin said this afternoon about you and her. . . ."

She stopped. Alban had swung about. She saw him as he had been when he leapt at Edwin for exactly the same accusation this afternoon, and she was afraid, terrified of her own son. . . . And dimly she remembered another occasion when she had been terrified of her own husband.

"You go too far, Mother," he said, after a moment. "I tried to kill Edwin for that lie this afternoon. That ought to have told you the truth."

Suddenly, because of her memory, because of her fear perhaps, she was a little piteous. "Alban," she cried, "don't you see I am thinking only of your own good?"

"Yes, Mother, I see that," he said after a moment. "But I don't think you are right this time."

"Can't you see that that girl—whatever she is, is merely playing on your sense of chivalry? It's only quixotery on your part."

"Much more than that, Mother. In fact, I don't think quixotery comes into it."

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"It does," she insisted, her tone hardening a little. "The mere idea of such a marriage—it's not rational. Anybody can see what it means—you know what people will say."

"What anybody says doesn't matter," he said.

She was keeping her temper with an effort. "That's part of your—your quixotic attitude," she said. "Look ahead, Alban, look to when that wears off. There'll come a time when you will bitterly regret this step."

"No, Mother, I don't think so. I'm in love with Gilda—always have been really, I think."

Her breath drew in in a sharp hiss. "That's it," she cried, her temper bettering her. "And she sees that. She is taking advantage of that."

He laughed. "What, Gilda? Oh, no, Mother, you are utterly wrong there."

Again he laughed. He was seeing Gilda as she had been when she held him off. He saw Gilda sitting in her room still certain that their love for each other made things impossible. . . . He saw Gilda, as yet unaware that he was going to marry her. He had to laugh at his mother's mistake, and his laugh stung her afresh.

"You're a silly little fool," she cried. "What do you know about these things? Blind! Blinded by a pretty face and a soft, sly manner. . . . What do you know about these things? Blind! Blinded by finger—the creature. She failed to catch one brother with her tricks, so she grabs at the other. She knows you're soft at least, knows she can fool you—the

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detestable, designing creature. She has had you in reserve all the time. She knows just how to get on *your* soft side, you stupid, self-sufficient little fool. . . .”

Alban walked towards the door: “We’ll get no further, Mother, on those lines. The thing can’t be altered now.”

Mrs. Kent stopped, stiffened. Her mouth shut tight and her eyes glared. The matter then was finished. Alban began to move through the door.

His mother said in a cutting voice, “And what do you think you are going to live on—the pair of you?”

### v

Alban turned not so much at her words, but at the implacable timbre of her voice. He stared from her to Oswald, who stood stiffly righteous and extremely self-conscious.

His mother said again: “And what do you propose to live on? Your precious weed farm?”

“No,” he answered slowly, “there’s no living there.”

“I see,” she sneered. “The Factory?”

“Naturally,” he said quietly, his eyes not leaving hers.

“If you marry that girl,” she said coldly, “you are immediately dismissed from the Factory.”

“That is rather childish, Mother,” he said, sorry that she should have descended to such a petty level.

“Childish,” she cried. “You will see. Marry

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that girl, and you never set foot in the Factory again. You have your choice."

"I have told you of my choice already."

"Very well," she said harshly. "We wash our hands of you. Go your own way. The Factory has finished with you."

"I'm afraid you don't get rid of me as easily as that," he said lightly. Really his mother was absurdly melodramatic. "I am not giving up the Factory."

"You have nothing to say in that," she snapped.  
"I say you are not to be employed at the Factory."

"I'm sorry, Mother," he said, "but the will puts it in a different light."

"Your father's will supports me—as it was meant to," said his mother, implacably.

It was then that Alban realised that this matter was grave. He realised it as much by the look on Oswald's face as by the cold anger in his mother. Oswald's face was righteous, smug. He could see from that look that this was Oswald's moment of triumph.

He knew he had been tricked, that he had lost his day, though he did not see how. He said quietly to test them, "The will lays it down that any son who chooses to enter Kent Drugs shall do so and be given a partnership on equal terms with any other son."

"But not a son who sets up in business on his own," snapped his mother.

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"I know. But I haven't."

"What about the Herb Farm?" said Oswald.

Alban fixed his brother with a contemptuous look. "The Herb Farm, as you know, is understood to be a part of Kent Drugs."

"Not by us," said Oswald, quickly.

Alban looked from one to the other. "I see," he said quietly. At once he had seen the whole plot.

"It is a distinct and separate business under the terms of the will," said his mother.

"As separate as Dunstan's engineering," said Oswald.

"And most convenient to your aims," said Alban, with a grim smile.

Oswald squirmed. "You would go into it against our advice," he mumbled.

"Your advice, however, did not include these facts. You kept that carefully up your sleeve, didn't you, Oswald?"

"A solicitor would have made it plain to you," he growled.

"Whereas I was fool enough to trust my brother."

"Your brother had other interests to look to beside yours," said his mother, firmly. "We have the family to protect. He did right."

"Good-night, Mother," said Alban, and again he made for the door.

"You understand the situation then?" she cried after him.

"Absolutely! Knuckle under or Get Out."

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"We cannot countenance this folly about this girl.  
Unless you give her up . . ."

"I am not giving her up. Good-night, Mother."

"Then you will both starve on your Farm," she snapped.

"It will be cleaner," he said, and was gone.

## *Chapter XIV*

### i

ALBAN went to Gilda's house to take her away. He had thought of many things to say, he had many persuasions to put forward; it might not be easy to win Gilda against her sense of justice.

She came in to him slim, exquisite, gentle, unchangeably lovely and adorable despite all changes. It was only the woman he loved he saw—the dear thing that meant all things to him—nothing else. And he saw how she trembled, how her eyes met his hungrily, humbly, and something in his heart broke and swept away all mere logic.

"Gilda," he cried, "Gilda! My dear!" and he had her in his arms, and she was against his heart, shaking and clinging in one. He held her tight because he would never let her go again.

He held her, kissing her hair, stroking its fineness, saying, "My dear! My dear!" over and over again, because that seemed the only, the supreme thing to say. And she held him, quietening gradually.

"Alban," she said presently, "what a dear thing you are. . . . But—but it isn't right. . . . I'm being so unfair . . . weak . . ."

"You love me," he said exultantly.

"You know it, Alban. I love you . . ."

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"Nothing else matters," he said.

Her arms tightened at that, her body pressed against his convulsively, she cried in a choking voice, "Why didn't I know it was *you* from the beginning? Why didn't I?"

"It doesn't matter, dear, we both know it now. And it's all that counts."

They were silent for a while holding each other. Then:

"It's strange. It's terrible. . . . Other things ought to count," she whispered.

"And they don't," he said. "You feel that, too, my dear. Everything else is gone—swept away. We're just loving each other as we ought to, because we've got to. Because always in our hearts we've been lovers. All I want is you, all you want is me. Isn't that it, Gilda?"

"It oughtn't to be," she breathed.

"But it is," he laughed softly. "Isn't it so, Gilda?"

"It is so, dear," she breathed. "I love you so much. I only want you . . . it's beaten my will."

"Thank God," he said.

Presently:

"And you're going to marry me, Gilda. You're going to marry me and come with me to Margaretting?"

She clung tight, unable to speak.

"You're coming with me to the Farm, where you belong, where we both belong, and there we will go on living, like this—always. You want that, Gilda?"

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She trembled, sighed. "I ought to fight it," she whispered.

"And you can't, dear," he smiled.

"What traitors love makes of us, Alban," she said.

"No," he laughed, "what lovers."

ii

After a time she said: "We ought to be—sensible, Alban."

He smiled down into her face, "Can we be?" And then, "Aren't we really being sensible for the first time?"

She gently disengaged herself from him, sat away from him, but their hands were holding instinctively.

"I believe that is right," she said. "But—but there ought to be talk about—about a lot of things."

"So I thought when I came here," he smiled. "I thought there was much to say, many reasons and arguments to put forward. I was prepared. But they aren't of value, really. They're futile. You and I and this thing that has come so certainly to us are the only things that count."

"There's your future," she said.

"That is my future, living with you at the Farm. It is the thing we love best; it is the thing that will enable us to fulfil ourselves best."

Her lips twisted a little, her eyes dropped, she whispered huskily, "There are—are other things, Alban . . . what I've done . . ."

He put his hands on her shoulders: "They don't

count. Look at me, Gilda, you see they don't count, you know in your heart they don't count. . . .”

“Alban,” she said, looking at him, “Alban . . . You dear, fine thing.”

“Well, then,” he said briskly, “we are going to be sensible. Everything that's gone before is—finished. It's even like a bad dream. We go down to Margaretting, we live and work. . . . I'm afraid it's going to be hard, Gilda, hard at first.”

“Do *I* mind that?” she smiled. “Why, I ask for that—hardness, to prove myself. But why should it be hard?”

He told her. He told her very simply what had happened. How he had to leave the Factory, how all he—they—had to live on now was the Farm, and how hard would be the battle for them until they made the Farm pay. Hard for her as well as him.

“I'd like nothing better,” she told him proudly. “I'd welcome it's very hardness. But you—the Factory, your ambition?”

He spread his hands. “It's gone. And the Farm is just as good an ambition.”

She suddenly realised the thing he had tried to soften to her, her part in his dismissal.

“But it's me. . . . I've come between you and the Factory, between you and your mother. . . . Alban! . . .”

“They are some of the things that don't matter, my dear.”

“But Alban, I can't . . . it was me.”

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"No, dear, I don't think it was. Honestly, I don't think it was. It was me. This move of my mother's isn't a new thing. It was planned long ago. I frightened her and Oswald, you see. It was my nature, the way I looked at things, that scared them. They saw in my ideas a danger to the Factory and to the family, and—and they felt they had to protect themselves. We must be fair to them. I don't think they intended using the weapon against me as they did. They hoped that perhaps with the years I'd change. But I'm unchanging, and so, well, they beat me, got rid of me."

"But—but if it wasn't for me they might take you back, Alban?"

"Only if I changed—and I can't change. You know that. You wouldn't have me change."

"I wouldn't have it," she said. "But to lose the Factory."

"There's the Farm."

"But that's not the big thing you wanted, Alban."

"It has compensations," he smiled at her. "It has—you."

She looked at him, smiled tremulously, flung her arms about him.

"Alban," she cried, "I'll make it up to you. I will! I will!"

## *Chapter XV*

SHE had made it up.

If she had had anything to make up she had done it, and more. She had made their life, hard though it had been, a thing of beauty and joy. Almost he had not noticed how hard it had been for sheer happiness.

She had worked, she had been behind his work always, strengthening him with her touch, inspiring him with the steady, soft valour of her glance. Her spirit had kept his enthusiasms singing, her sweetness had kept the little house sweet.

Yes, it had been hard. With the Farm not paying, not meant to be paying just then, it was only by dint of working like slaves, by cutting things down almost to bare necessities, that they were able to hang on at all. Only by keeping at it day in, day out, and into the night, for months and months, were they able to pull round into bare solvency at all.

It was terrible work for a girl gently nurtured. There was no servant, they could not afford that. She took over all the household duties, and some of the book-work, and when needed lent a hand in the fields, too. She worked almost beyond her strength, Alban thought—but always her fine courage enabled her to summon up fresh reserves of strength, and smiling and indomitable she kept on.

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When Alban, looking at her anxiously, said: "We must get help. We can't go on like this. It'll kill you."

"It's making a woman of me," she laughed back. "And if we get help—well, it'll be for the fields. Do you know you are putting in a seventeen-hour day seven days a week, Alban, in fields and sheds?"

Well, he had to. They had to cut down manual workers if they were to hold on at all. But he had expected his share, he was hardened, anyhow. . . . But Gilda—it was a miracle she pulled through.

It was harder for her when the baby came, for she had to combine the duties of nurse with that of cook, house-maid, scrub-woman, and wife. But she managed even that, her gallantry and endurance were miraculous.

Rosamund helped as nurse after a time. She insisted that the baby should be called Joan, "after my bobbed hair," she said, and she came down to the cottage as a sort of "paying godmother." That was the way she silenced their protests. She had become something of a fashion now as an illustrator of those classics which nobody reads, but which are sumptuously produced and unloaded in large quantities on unprotesting innocents by way of Christmas gifts. Most of this work she did in spring and summer, and she came down to Moap's Farm to do it, and acting as nurse seemed an essential part of it. She got peace and beauty and happiness there, but that wasn't all she was thinking of. The extravagant sum she insisted on paying for her room helped to keep things

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going. Indeed, if it hadn't been for that, and for financial help sent by Dunstan and Mr. Conroy, they could not have turned the corner at all.

But they turned it. Slowly things straightened out, as things will if one hammers at them hard and long enough. A big London firm took over the drug output that should have gone to Kent Drugs, but which Kent Drugs refused to buy from a moral outcast, and at an enhanced price. A Belladonna crop turned out to be a bumper, and firms began to compete for the output, because of the excellence of the strains.

Hard work, but they won out in time, began even to put money by, began even to have ambitions. "One of these days," Alban laughed, "I'll mortgage Joan and buy or lease extra land along the Bottom. I'll put in more Belladonna and we'll be rich beyond the dreams of profiteers."

"Pooh," Gilda smiled, "that's not an adequate return for Joan, and you know it."

"She knows the secrets of my very soul," he smiled, and he tilted her chin up to kiss her.

"Contented?" she asked.

"There never was such contentment, dear," he smiled. "All the same it would be jolly to have that land and feel that we—and Joan were safe for life."

"It'll come," she said.

It came. It was in the very letter Rosamund sent them, telling of Aunt Heppie's death. When Alban read as far as that he stopped and thought of all that

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Aunt Heppie had meant. When Gilda came to his side he was still in thought.

"From Rosamund?" she asked, nodding at the letter. "Any news?"

"Aunt Heppie's dead," he said, handing her the letter.

"Aunt Heppie—poor, dear old thing. She made me tremble the first time I saw her."

"There was more than that to it, I think," he laughed.

She looked up, a lovely flashing glance. "Much more," she murmured, "she made me blush. She was the first to give me the news that I loved you. And you. . . . I rather liked Aunt Heppie, really, there was more in her than met the eye." She went on reading, and then said in a startled voice. "Much more—why didn't you tell me, Alban?"

"Tell you what, old darling?"

"Why you haven't even read it. . . . Listen. 'Aunt Heppie as Aunt Heppie as ever in her will,' says Rosamund, 'she set the family gasping. . . . Not altogether unjoyous to a cynic like me. The reason—you are her will, Alban. Everything goes to you. Her interests in Kent Drugs—how unpleasant for Oswald—and all her cash. You'll hear from the lawyer all about it, but, you dear, I must get in first. You're worth nearly £10,000 in hard coin at least.' "

"Great heavens," gasped Alban. Gilda read on.

"The reason she leaves it all to you—the old darling, how I wish I had loved her!—is that you

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are the only real Kent, with any hint of backbone in you. Isn't it amazing coming from her?" "

"It *is* amazing," said Alban, "the old dear."

"Is it?" said Gilda, with her quiet smile. "I wonder? I rather think she saw you more clearly than any of us. I wish, like Rosamund, I'd loved her." She moved to his side. "So it has come," she said.

"What?"

"The new land in the Bottom."

"Yes," said Alban. "It means that, and much more than that."

"We don't want too much more," she whispered.

"No," he agreed. "We couldn't be richer, in the things that matter. But this is solid earth under our feet at last, Gilda. We're out of the woods, old girl."

"Only they weren't woods," she said, "they were groves in Arcadia."

THE END









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